THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

MARCH, 1955
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ONE SHILLING AND NINEPENCE

STORIES BY

MICHAEL GILBERT

ROBERT FONTAINE

DOROTHY COTTRELL

EDWARD LINDALL

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CHRISTOPHER LANDON

AND OTHERS

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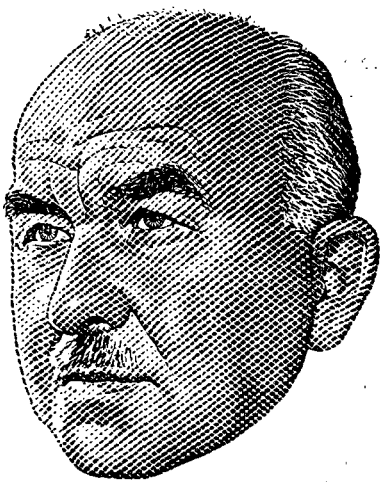

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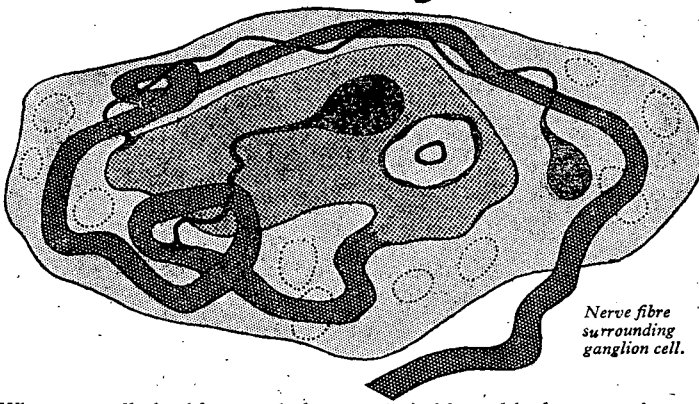

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ARGOSY

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The Spring Equinox

NOW is the pause between asleep and awake:
Two seasons take
A colour and quality each from each as yet.
The new stage-set
(Spandrel, column and fan) of spring is raised against
the winter backdrop
Murrey and soft;
Now aloft
The sun swings on the equinoctial line.
Few flowers yet shine:
The hellebore hangs a clear green bell and opulent
leaves above dark mould;
The light is cold
In arum leaves, and a primrose flickers
Here and there; the first cool bird-song flickers
in the thicket.
Clouds are pale as the pollen from sallows;
March fallows are white with lime like frost . . .

ANNE RIDLER

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A CORNER OF THE CELLAR

She usually got what she wanted in the end

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"AND don't forget the boiler," said Mrs. Cotton. "I opened it up so that we can have a nice bath. It'll need two scuttles of coke."

Sam Cotton groaned.

When they had moved into the Old Rectory at Marlhammer he had felt in his bones that he was making his last move. He was only forty-nine. But the time comes in every man's life when he will settle down to enjoy the fruits of his toil.

Starting as an unskilled, untrained, almost unpaid assistant to an assistant in a shaky firm of chartered accountants, he had worked. How he had worked! Twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day—in his spare time, at night, during the week-end. Now he was a qualified accountant, a partner, a director of four companies, and a rich man.

Too fat, not healthy, seldom happy, but rich.

The Old Rectory had cost money. It was a plain, Georgian house, of dark red brick and darker red tile, with more solid wood in its window-frames and box shutters than a builder would put into a row of houses these days.

It stood back a little, isolated by beech trees from the road. It had its private path to the little church, but it was nearly a quarter of a mile from its nearest human neighbour.

"It's pretty," agreed Mrs. Cotton, "but it's got too many rooms."

This, like most of Bertha Cotton's deceptively simple remarks, was true. The house had been designed for and occupied by old-fashioned country parsons. It had many bedrooms and vast box-rooms. It had a pantry, which the Cottons used as a kitchen. A kitchen, which they used as a store-room. And range upon range of stores and sheds and cellars.

"I wonder how the Grundsells managed?" said Mrs. Cotton. She referred to their immediate predecessors, who had purchased the house from the last incumbent some five years previously.

Mr. Grundsell had been a small, happy, cheerful person, popular in the village. Not nearly as rich as Sam Cotton, but perhaps

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happier. His wife, older than he by some years, had been something of a mystery at first. A heavy, dark, foreign-looking woman, who seldom spoke.

However, nothing is hidden for long from the legion of char-women and daily helps, and it became known—whisper it softly—that she drank. Seldom, but my, how deeply!

"A cupboard full of bottles," reported Mrs. Tyzer. "Gin. And another pile—so big—buried in the paddock."

However, Mrs. Grundsell had not lasted. Perhaps she found the house too isolated. She spoke wistfully of Blackpool. Mr. Grundsell, who gave in to her in everything, gave in to her in this. One night of dark and storm when no one was about, he packed her and her belongings into their big, closed car and drove her off. Or so he reported, when he mentioned it later.

Marlhammer saw her no more. Shortly afterwards, Grundsell had decided to sell.

"Not surprised, really," said Mrs. Tyzer. "A great big house, and him all alone in it."

That was how the Cottons had come to buy it. A handsome house, full of large, cheerful rooms, rooms still redolent of the line of sober, godfearing clerics that had inhabited them with their industrious wives, their contingents of servants, and their quiverfuls of children. Against the edge of one bedroom door Sam Cotton had found their heights recorded, starting with Benjamin, a mere two-foot-nine off the ground and running up, through eight others, to Ruth.

A cheerful house, with one reservation.

He could not get used to the cellar.

Well, it was not really a cellar at all. It lay down two steps only at the end of a series of pantries, dairies, and wash-houses. A sort of sunken cul-de-sac. It had been designed as a game-larder. As you shone your torch upwards—the electric light did not reach so far—you could see the great steel hooks, deep-rusted now, in the beams of the roof. It had a floor of badly cracked concrete.

"Just the place for coke," said Mrs. Cotton.

It was late summer when they moved in, but, warned by her experience of the winter before, she had ordered four tons. And had got them.

Mrs. Cotton usually got what she wanted in the end.

As autumn turned into winter and winter into spring, and Sam Cotton made his nightly, dreaded pilgrimage, sometimes one scuttle, sometimes two, the huge pile diminished. As it diminished, a curious fancy grew in Mr. Cotton's mind.

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There was something evil about the cellar. And the evil lay in the far corner where the coke was piled deepest.

He got into the way of calculating how long, at his present nightly rate of progress, it would be before he uncovered this corner. Two months. One month.

He said nothing directly to his wife, who was not an imaginative woman, and inclined to be impatient of her husband's fancies. But he did suggest, casually and tentatively, that they might perhaps take on a resident servant. At the moment they had only Mrs. Tyzer, who worked like a giant by day, but deserted them at six o'clock.

"I could never stand anyone living in," said Mrs. Cotton. "They'd get on my nerves."

"We could afford it," said Sam.

"It isn't a question of money," said Bertha. "And anyway, it's quite unnecessary. Do I ever ask you to do anything except get the coke at night?"

It was true. She was a splendid manager. Twenty years younger than Sam, and five times as healthy.

"I don't even ask you to wash up," she said.

"I wouldn't mind washing up," said Sam. But he had left it at that. It would have been too difficult to explain. And it would soon be summer—and the last of the coke would be gone.

A fortnight. A week.

He had noticed lately that a crack in the floor seemed to lead directly into the corner. It grew larger as he uncovered it.

That there was something in the corner, he was now certain. He had lived a great deal of his life by instinct, and now all his instincts told him so.

As the pile of coke diminished, as he bent, night after night, to fill the two steel hods, nearer and nearer and nearer to that corner, the corner to which the crack pointed, a prickling sweat broke out all over his body. His heart thumped, and he felt curiously light-headed. He had never felt quite that way before, but it reminded him of an occasion when, as a boy, he had fainted from overwork and lack of food.

There *was* something in that corner. Something inevitable, something deadly that would become apparent when the last scuttle of coke was removed.

But how would it be if the last scuttle—the very last scuttle—was removed by someone else? Like everything in life, it was simply a matter of calculation. The daily woman filled four scuttles during the day. He filled two at night. It was like one of those card games when you have to arrange your play so as to avoid holding the last card.

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When he had seen the coke the night before there had been, he calculated, about sixteen scuttles of it. Four would have gone. He would take another two—then Mrs. Tyzer would take four more—

"You've been doing sums to yourself for ten minutes," said his wife. "What's wrong? Money?"

"Nothing's wrong," said Sam.

"Then hurry along and get the coke and we can get off to bed. I don't know about you, but I'm dog-tired."

"We shall have to be ordering some more soon," said Sam, cunningly. "I don't suppose we've enough left for three days."

"We haven't that," said his wife, briskly. "I lent a bit to Mrs. Tyzer. She's right out. You ought to be able to scrape up enough for tonight, though. They're delivering a ton in the morning."

With a curious leaden feeling which centred on the top of his stomach and the bottom of his chest, Sam Cotton walked heavily out to the cellar.

It was as his wife had said. A pathetic remnant of coke and coke-dust covered the corner. The crack gaped, so wide now that he could almost put his fist into it. Two blocks of the cement flooring looked almost as if they had been taken up and carelessly laid down again.

Sam picked up the shovel and bent down.

It had come now. It had to be faced. As he had faced and outfaced other things in his hard life.

His heart was pounding so that it nearly choked him. One scuttle. Then the other. The coke which was left would exactly fill it.

He stooped again and scraped the shovel on the floor. A blinding red light. An uprush of dizziness. He was on his knees. Then on his face, his nose an inch from the crack . . .

"Murder," said the young doctor, savagely, to his partner. "Plain murder. Letting him go out, night after night, with his heart in that state, and grovel for coke and lift weights. But not the sort of murder she can be hanged for—more's the pity."

★ ★ ★

JUST DESSERT?

Mrs. Raynes, whose portrait by Steer hangs in the Tate Gallery and who lived to be ninety (she died in 1925), must be numbered among Chelsea characters, if only for her excellent remark, when complimented on a pudding—"There's art in everythink, even in painting pictures."

WILLIAM GAUNT, *Chelsea*

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RATE OF DESCENT

The furious static was shrieking through the headphones

by DAVID BEATY

SNUG in the two-man's-land of his own Skytruck, Bill Kennett was flying high on the all-male top of the world.

Below him, like a golden vein through the green earth, forty winding miles of the River Thames glittered in the sun. CAVU —ceiling and visibility unlimited—the finest word in the vocabulary of aviation. Tunelessly but blissfully, he was singing a song. It had to do with rolling home, with no cares to grieve him and no pretty little girl to deceive him. It was a song most men can sing with conviction only when they're drunk. But Bill Kennett could sing it when he was stone-cold sober.

Kennett's Air Services Ltd. was booming. All day long, he flew; and if the evenings in his apartment-cum-office at Richmond weren't so much fun, it was only because there was so much paper work he had to get through on his own.

He sighed with pure content as he throttled back the two engines, and put the nose of the Skytruck down into a slow descent. Turning his head towards the right-hand seat, he said to his co-pilot, " Get clearance from the Tower for a straight-in, Bert."

Bert Jackson had just contacted London on Channel B of the Very High Frequency voice radio, when the Ground Approach Controller cut in. Would Able X-Ray help out their training programme with a practice radar approach?

" Damn," Bill Kennett said. " I want down." Then a flicker of conscience crossed his broad, sunburnt face. Amiably, he spoke into the microphone himself: " O.K., O.K. Able X-Ray is levelling off at three thousand for G.C.A."

The next minute, he nearly hit the roof. A girl's voice said with a slight, attractive hesitation: " Maintain three thousand, Able X-Ray. Turn sixty degrees right for identification."

" A woman! " he shouted at Jackson. " They've put a damn woman on G.C.A.! "

He moved his lips still more, but no words came out. Watching him, Bert Jackson grinned. Whenever there was a girl around, Bill Kennett was always the same. He was well known as the

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most hard-boiled bachelor in the business. Even Bert's wife, Janet, had regretfully given up trying to marry him off to one of her girl-friends well over a year ago.

"Have you turned, Able X-Ray?"

With an effort, Kennett recovered his voice. "Gimme a chance," he said irritably. "Turning now."

Half a minute later, the voice said sweetly, "I can see you now, Able X-Ray."

And I can see you, too, Bill Kennett thought. And not just a fuzzy blip on the radar, either. That voice, half demure, half self-assured, was a give-away. It said quite plainly: a two-toned honey of sugar and brass, of a nice dancing weight, with fingers just the right size to lift a champagne cocktail.

He was muttering something about wasting his time, when through the clear air came, "Turn onto 280. Begin your rate of descent at five hundred feet a minute."

"280, descending," Kennett snapped back. "And if you think you're anywhere near—"

But the voice gently interrupted him: "Do not acknowledge further instructions."

Kennett glowered at Jackson.

"Turn left-left onto 275. Your rate of descent is quite O.K."

Slowly the Skytruck dropped lower. They were well to the left of the runway. Yet the girl was telling them to turn even farther left.

At four hundred feet, Kennett could stand it no longer. "Breaking off practice," he called out. "Don't want to land in Staines reservoir. Not today."

With a lugubrious S-turn, he brought the Skytruck in line with the runway, and landed.

He picked up the microphone. "Glad that was practice," he said briefly.

"I'm sorry." The voice hesitated, quivered a little. "That's the first let-down I've done."

The sunshine touching up the drab airport buildings went unnoticed. It was still CAVU, but Kennett's face had clouded over.

"Just like a woman," he growled at Bert Jackson. "Does a bad job. Then makes *you* feel the heel at the end of it." He taxied to the ramp in thoughtful silence.

Next day, when he was coming back from Paris, Kennett was again asked if he'd do a practice G.C.A. He swore loudly. Then he added in an offhand way, "Might as well, I suppose, Bert."

Jackson gave him a curious glance. He had never known

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Kennett so co-operative with the Ground Controlled Approach people. "Wouldn't be the girl, Bill?"

"The girl, Bert?" Kennett's face was a study of puzzled astonishment.

Jackson was convinced. "Forget it," he said. "Just thought she'd got a pleasant voice. I got the wrong end of a hunch."

Kennett was saying that all women were the same to him, when the girl came up with: "Hullo, Able X-Ray."

Bert Jackson did his job as spokesman on the V.H.F. and gave her a polite hullo back. The preliminaries over, they started the approach.

This time, the girl brought the Skytruck, if not down the centre-line, at least into a position where a landing was possible.

"That," Bill Kennett said when they were back on the ground, "was a little better, thank you."

"Thank *you*," the voice said.

Kennett frowned. The emphasis on the last syllable brimmed over with silent laughter. It was still echoing in his ears as he taxied back to the ramp and stopped the engines. He sat in his seat, chewing something over.

"You know, Bert," he said at last, "can't make up my mind what that girl's really like."

Jackson reached down for his engine log and the route books on the floor beside his seat. "Sounds a nice girl, Bill."

"Interesting sort of voice," Kennett murmured. "Unusual."

"You thinking of sitting there all day, Bill?"

Kennett hardly heard him. "Wonder if she's a blonde, Bert?"

"Why not make a date and find out?" Jackson stolidly pushed his own seat back, and got out. At the cockpit door, he heard Kennett say, "Just as soon as I've got the time, I might, at that."

But somehow he never seemed to get the time. He was in the process of cutting his freight rates and extending his routes. So two weeks later, even though now he insisted on doing the radio patter with her at the same time as he flew the aircraft, he was still in doubt over what she was like.

"I'm beginning to think she's a brunette, Bert."

Jackson said nothing. He had already told Janet the hardly credible story that Bill had gone crazy about some girl's voice on G.C.A. "But you can bet he won't do anything about it," he added. "Except scare her off with his bark. And make me giddy with his eternal radar approaches."

The trouble was that although Kennett could picture the girl quite plainly, each time it was a different girl. The face changed.

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Sometimes she was a hard blonde; sometimes a pretty brunette with a soft skin and a full red mouth.

"Hullo, Able X-Ray," she'd say warmly one day, as though she was meeting a friend in the street. "You're our very best customer." Then another time she'd seem cold, distant, and very impersonal.

One autumn morning, Kennett did not look once out of the window at the runway. All through the approach, he stayed on instruments, doing exactly what she told him, while Jackson kept a look-out.

At the last possible moment, he lifted his eyes. With a feeling of immense surprise, he saw himself perfectly lined up with the runway, at just the right height for a landing.

"Not bad," he said gruffly into the microphone. "You're getting the general idea."

He waited for a reply. But the voice said nothing. He appealed to Jackson: "No point in giving the kid a swelled head, eh, Bert?"

Next day, the voice sounded a shade cooler. It warmed up at the end, after Kennett had nearly fallen backwards out of the Skytruck in praise of the approach.

And then, as he talked to her more often, the picture of her steadied. He began to know each inflection of her voice, the way she paused (sometimes for quite a breath-taking time) between "Hullo," and "Able X-Ray." There was real appeal in the way she said, "Start descent." She could put a lovely lilt into the words, "Left-left."

She took shape in his mind as a rather special sort of girl—pretty in a warm way, full of laughter, and at the same time full of understanding. Fun to take out and equally fun to sit talking to, well into a winter's night. She began to take on a background too: a castle in the clouds around him, a kind of halfway house between heaven and earth that he built especially to suit her. He was perfectly happy. It all seemed an ideal arrangement.

"What Janet and I want to know," said Jackson with a tinge of exasperation, one day after the usual practice G.C.A., "is *when* you're going to have a date with that girl, and find out what she's like."

Bill Kennett answered immediately, "No need to find out. I *know* what she's like." He really meant it. In its own way, it was true.

All the same, he didn't manage to get around to making her image in his mind any more substantial. "What did I tell you?" Bert said to Janet, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't think he knows how to ask a girl for a date."

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The weeks passed. Autumn went into winter. And still the only dates Kennett had with the girl were at her suggestion: "Like to do a practice G.C.A., Able X-Ray?"

But it was more rarely now. She must have finished her training. The chief Controllers were men, and they nearly always seemed to be on watch. "Too busy today," Kennett would say to them. "Can't spare the time today."

Then late one afternoon round the beginning of January, he was coming in from Berlin, and it began to snow very slightly. He looked in surprise at the soft flakes floating down lazily in front of him. Nothing like this had been forecast. London came up with their latest weather: "Cloud base three hundred feet, visibility one mile in snow."

"That damn front has moved faster than they thought," he said to Jackson. "Looks like this time we'll be doing a G.C.A., good and proper."

They were number eight to land, stacked up at the Epsom range. The static of the storm was drowning out the range signals. They circled. Number Four took five attempts to get down, holding everyone up. The snow got heavier. The Tower gave the visibility as eight hundred yards. Then four hundred. All aircraft were advised to divert to Prestwick, where the weather was reasonable.

"Haven't got the fuel," Kennett told them. "What's Manston?"

Manston was out with a visibility of fifty yards. Hurn, then? Eighty yards. Filton? Twenty yards.

"Better get me down," Kennett told G.C.A. when at last they took him over. "Haven't got I.L.S. . . and all my alternates are out."

"Will do," a man's voice said cheerfully on the V.H.F. "How d'you read?"

"Loud and clear," Kennett answered. The Very High Frequency was unaffected by the static of the storm.

And then, just as the man identified Able X-Ray on his scope, he faded out completely. There was an odd smell of burning in the cabin. "The V.H.F.," Kennett shouted to Bert. "The damn thing's gone dead on us."

Jackson went to the racks where the radio equipment was kept. He came back and pulled a long face. "Burnt out, Bill," he said.

Kennett tried to get through on the ordinary High Frequency Command radio. He fiddled with the control knobs of the set, trying to get it on frequency. But he knew very well he was tuning it in perfectly. It was loud enough. It was on station.

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The only trouble was, it was impossible to read. The crackling static of the storm was terrific. He heard the man's voice say, "Able X-Ray," but everything after that was quite unreadable.

"V.H.F.'s failed," he howled down at them. "I'll have to use H.F."

A thick, ear-splitting noise, like a jangled crashing of cymbals, answered him. The Skytruck flew on. The snow-flakes were heavier. He heard a man say, "Stay at three thousand. Can you hear—" Then he faded again, swamped in the furious static that was now shrieking through the headphones.

"Steer 260," he heard, and he slewed round to starboard.

"Start descent."

Bumping badly, he went cautiously down into the black air. "Left-left," the voice said, "onto—" Then it was drowned out again.

There was a minute of nothing but the storm.

"200," the voice said weakly. The Skytruck was nearly at right angles to the heading of the runway.

Kennett was down to three hundred feet and he could see nothing but snow. He could be anywhere now. He opened up the throttles.

"Going round again," he howled through the microphone. "Can't hear anything . . . see anything."

He pulled the stick back. At rated power the engines roared up into the sky. Then he shouted out, "It's the static. It's killing everything. Put—the—girl—on."

He hoped they would hear. He hoped they would see what he meant. "Might be able to hear a voice pitched a tone higher than the static," he said grimly to Jackson.

Bert looked dubious. "Bit inexperienced, isn't she, even supposing we can hear her?" With difficulty he kept the anxiety out of his voice. "I've known rosier situations. One mistake on her part and—"

"You needn't worry," Bill Kennett said definitely. "She won't make a mistake."

They waited. Able X-Ray was at three thousand again, milling back to the marker. The snow was pelting down. In the earphones there was only the deafening static of the storm. Then suddenly and miraculously, through all the crackling, quite clear and sweet, Bill heard the girl say, "Hullo, X-Ray. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," he yelled back. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

Quickly her voice said, "Turn onto 080. Descend to two thousand."

"Turning 080," he repeated. "Three descending two."

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Four minutes later, he heard the voice still gallantly holding its own against the noises in his earphones, " Turn onto 280." It was the heading of the runway. " Start descent at five hundred feet a minute."

He eased the aircraft round. He pulled the throttles back a little. Able X-Ray descended uneasily into the unknown, black night.

" Your rate of descent is good. Your heading of 280 is quite O.K."

The voice was terribly calm, almost nonchalant, with behind it a hint of comfort and encouragement. It was, Bill Kennett thought, so very much a voice you could trust. The static howled, trying to drown it. But the higher tone of her voice still held its own.

" Turn left-left onto 275."

He put on left rudder. The Skytruck was down to three hundred feet.

" Fifty feet too high, X-Ray."

He pushed the nose forward. There was precious little altitude left.

" Three degrees starboard onto 278."

The altimeter showed a hundred feet. There was nothing but the spotted night outside. The voice remained unhurried, easy to follow. He glanced out of the window. There was still no sign of the runway lights.

Then crisply, like a parade-ground order, came, " You're over the threshold, X-Ray. Land dead ahead."

Kennett grabbed the throttles and slammed them tight shut. He waited in a long agony of seven seconds, holding the Skytruck on the last heading she gave him. Bert Jackson sat there saying nothing. There was just snow and darkness outside. Then Kennett saw a muzzy light out of the corner of his left eye.—

" Runway," Jackson shouted. " You're O.K. I can see lights both sides. She's brought us down smack in the centre! "

Bill saw a patch of runway under him. He eased the aircraft towards it, pulled the nose up, and scrunched softly down onto the new-laid snow.

It was customary for pilots who had been helped on a sticky let-down to go to the G.C.A. caravan and thank the operator personally. Kennett insisted on going by himself in the Company van.

When he returned half an hour later, he seemed in a daze. All he said was, " You drive, Bert."

As they changed seats, Bert asked, " Well, what's she like? "

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Bill gave a far-away smile. "Exactly what I knew she'd be like, Bert. Exactly." He didn't seem keen to say any more.

"If you're not going to talk, Bill," Bert said as he let in the clutch, "here's tonight's paper."

The van sloshed off into the snow. Kennett sat silent, absorbed in the *Evening Herald*. A frown had begun to furrow his forehead. As they stopped by a traffic light, the heading of the column he was reading caught Jackson's eye. It said simply: *Houses and Flats to let furnished.*

Bill Kennett had landed.

☆ ★ ★

SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE

"Make every bargain clear and plain," says the proverb, "that none may afterwards complain." Not all our bargainers followed this advice, and there is here and there a lingering regret. Allow one point for recognizing the participants in each transaction, one for the source, and one for the author, making a total of twenty-four. The answers are on page 96.

1. *Was it right to let loose those clever, industrious little mice, undoubtedly the property of Simpkin? Right or wrong, it turned out to be an excellent stroke of clothing business.*
2. *Women are out of place in commercial transactions, he claimed, but the strings attached to his offer of three hundred pounds to buy an education were certainly petticoat strings.*
3. *A bargain to beef about, you might think, perhaps, with nothing to show except the seeds of discontent, which, however, proved to be runners-up for a feathered gold-mine.*
4. *His breeches cost him but a crown, but they were all too dear, too dear, in truth by sixpence.*
5. *A tempting contract ensuring personal attendance for twenty-four years, with deferred terms—and the devil to pay on expiry.*
6. *"A cottage lone and still" costs only a passing bell in this currency; the offer is hypothetical, though, and buyer and seller have identical interests.*
7. *A golden treasure lost, and, as if to replace it, a golden-haired treasure found—an exchange that even a miser could think worth while.*
8. *Five guineas—and a fit of alcoholic remorse—was all this young farmer took home from the fair, for the sailor had taken him at his word and bought his wife and daughter.*

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ALEC DA MONK

The sweet sterling was back in his hand —every penny of it

by PAUL LINCOLN

LENNY the Lord sat back to watch the fight. He wasn't the least bit excited. Why should he be? He had made a round-book—six to four the Gipsy, even money the Italian—and stood to lose nothing even if the Italian won. Big Jim, friend of many gambling years and a fellow spectator, took a seat beside him.

"How you make out, Lenny?"

"Thirty if the Gipsy wins. Covered if he don't."

"Me—twenty if the Gipsy wins. Covered if he don't."

"Ah . . ."

"Ah . . ."

And the grosser Jim and the slimmer Lenny fell back in their seats in a state of ennui. Out on the fringes of the arena, however—that was in the cheaper seats—excitement was high. The fight between Gipsy Harman and Luigi Fuselli had been looked forward to for weeks. Not the least excited of these gazers from the gods was Tony Mazziotti who, being a son of Italy himself, had naturally backed Fuselli. In fact, he had backed him for some twenty pounds and that lay in the noble pocket of Lenny the Lord.

But as Tony was telling the men around him: "This boy from Roma—he cannotta lose. He's a wunnerful puncher. He hit the Gipse so hard he think he been kicked by a stool."

"By a mule."

"By a mule."

But not all his listeners were in agreement with him. "Aw, go an' feed your monkey, Tony! You don' know what you're talkin' about."

"This, too, I can do," said the ice-cream vendor, and parted the folds of his scarf. "Alec, come out!"

The men gaped. Under the scarf, clinging to Tony's lapel, was, indeed, a monkey—a very small monkey with a red pillbox hat and a blue jacket.

"You see, gentlemen, Alec is the supporter of the Italian boy, too. He wears him the colours of Fuselli's pants."

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The men swallowed. "How'd he get in here?" asked one of them.

"He come on my chest," said Tony. "I am thinkin' perhaps I shall pay for him—half the price, mebbe. And then I think perhaps they don' let him in 'cause he's a monk. So I put him under my scarf." With an affectionate smile spreading across his fat, shining face, the Italian chucked the monkey under the chin. "How you doin' down there, Alec? How you doin'?"

But Alec didn't seem to care for this lovey-dovey stuff. He snarled and knocked Tony's hand away.

"Ho! Ho! Wassa marrer, ha? Wassa marrer? You don' like that Tony is nice to you in public? Ho! Ho! What you think, ha? What you think? Ho, ho—ho, ho!"

One of the men, a little brighter than the rest, here put in a very pertinent question.

"But the monk—does he *like* boxing?"

Tony's brown Neapolitan eyes clouded over angrily.

"What you mean, does he like boxin'? What you think he is—a freak or somethin'? Sure, he like boxin'! He's just the same as you an' me."

The questioner was satisfied. "Sure," he nodded. "Sure."

"Sure! Of course, I'm sure. Alec, punch this fella in the puss."

A hairy little fist flashed out at once and hit the questioner on the nose. More alarmed than hurt, he let out a cry. The men around him rocked with laughter.

"Sssh!" admonished Tony, putting a finger to his lips. "Mebbe the stewards wonder what's wrong an' come an' look. Mebbe they put Alec out."

The men looked concerned at this. They fell into a brooding silence.

"Si! An' what I do then, ha? I been promisin' Alec I take 'im to the fight for weeks." The men, especially those with children, nodded sympathetically.

"Sure! It is the last one before we go back to Italia. No more no fights, no more no ice-cream, no more no England. Sure! I got the money and I buy me a farm!"

That wasn't quite true. Tony had part of the money—the rest was in the keeping of the Lord—the Lord who sat in the ringside seat.

But as Fuselli, the Italian fighter, was sure to win, the money was perfectly safe.

A roar went up from the crowd as the two boxers entered the arena—the lanky, tensed-up Roman and the squat, hairy Gipsy. The gloves were fitted, the announcements made, the instruc-

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tions given, and the fight was on—or rather off, for, coming out of his corner, the nervy Italian walked straight into a sucker-punch, fell flat on his back and was counted out.

Hardly able to believe his eyes, Tony collapsed in his seat, a broken man. The men about him bellowed with laughter and began to inquire about his plans for the future.

"Haw! Haw! Haw! What you going to do now, Tony? Bet on the next fight to get your money back? Haw! Haw! Haw!"

But Tony did not join in the laughter—did not even smile. The position was far more serious than the signori realized. He had already booked a third-class fare to Napoli. He had already told his people he was coming home. They would be waiting for him—his mother, his father, his four brothers and three sisters—and Vittoria. Vittoria! Madonna mia! How now would there be the great wedding with the fine clothes and the red wine? And her brothers—in particular the one in the carabinieri—what would *they* do to him when they knew he now had no money to marry their sister?

He had to think quickly, he had to move fast. He must go to the Lord and tell him his plight. He was a nice man, a kind man, even though he was a book-maker. He felt sure he would see his predicament and do what he could. Maybe he would not give him *all* his soldi back but some—some that he could add to the little that he still held. He took a firmer grip on Alec, who, disappointed with the fight, had now turned his back on the ring and was nestling into Tony's shoulder, and made his way to the ringside.

Meanwhile, in that more august section of the auditorium, the Lord and Big Jim were considering the physical condition of the fallen Roman.

They both had their eyes trained on him as he sat on his stool being slapped and pummelled into consciousness.

"Took a nasty clip," said Lenny.

"Very nasty," said Jim.

"Still out," said Lenny.

"Out to the wide," said Jim.

"Feel it in the mornin'," said Lenny.

"Feel it like 'ell," said Jim.

There was a commotion behind them.

"You can't go down there!" a steward was shouting. "Them places is for the toffs!"

"This I cannotta help. I must go and see the Lord."

"See the who?"

"See the Lord."

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" Who's the—oh, the bookie! "

Lenny stirred in his seat. " Jim," he said.

" Yes, Lenny? "

" I 'ear someone what's callin' my name."

Big Jim cocked a fat ear—waited a moment—shook his large head. " Don' 'ear nothin', Lenny."

" No? Sorry you been troubled."

" That's all right, Lenny."

" Mistah Lord! "

Lenny started. He turned round slowly in his seat, looked up.

" You call me? "

" Si, Mistah Lord! I do, because I must speak with you."

Lenny nodded. He turned back to Jim.

" I told you there was someone callin' me, Jim."

Big Jim nodded. " Yes, I can see it now, Lenny."

Lenny nodded back. He returned to Tony who was perspiring with nervousness. " Well, what you want? "

" I want you give me my money back."

Lenny's jaw dropped. " Huh? "

" This fighter I bet on—the boy from Roma. I know he takes the poke an' is counted out. But I ain't got the money to go back to Italia, Mistah Lord."

" Jim," said Lenny.

" Yes, Lenny? "

" He's bonkers."

Big Jim put a big eye on Tony. He nodded.

" Yes, Lenny."

" But, Mistah Lord—" pleaded Tony. " My mama, my pappa —Vittoria! "

" Who's 'im? "

" 'Im's a 'er, Mistah Lord, my sweet'eart."

" Oh . . . I see. Aaaah! " Lenny leapt to his feet and backed to the ring platform, his face wild in alarm. " What's that? "

Big Jim looked quickly at Tony's chest. He leaned forward, examined the object Lenny was pointing at.

" It's a tail, Lenny," he said. " A tail growin' out of 'is chest." He paused and reflected. " Beggin' your pardon, Lenny. It's not '*is* tail. It's a monkey's."

" Sure, sure," said Tony smiling, forgetting for the moment that he hadn't paid for Alec's admission. " It's my little monk, Alec. He come with me. Come on out, Alec, and say 'ullo to the gentlemen."

Alec appeared and politely doffed his hat. Then, following the routine of the ice-cream cart, he put out his hand for money. But Lenny did not think of money—for the first time in his life—

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instead he thought the monkey was offering his paw in greeting. His eyes glazed over wonderingly.

"Why, Jim," he said, delighted with Alec's cordiality, "he wants to shake 'ands with me!"

Jim considered the proffered paw for a moment. "Yes, Lenny, I fancy he do," he confirmed.

"Sure he do!" agreed Tony, always the opportunist. "Shake the 'and with him, Mistah Lord!"

Lenny giggled like a girl. "Tee, hee! Yes, I think I will. How are you, Alec? A pleasure, I'm sure."

Alec backed up Tony well. He shook Lenny's hand with the warmness of a politician canvassing for votes.

"Well, would you believe it? Would you believe it?" Lenny gurgled excitedly. "You know, Jim, I think he likes me. Yes, I think he do!"

Jim nodded slowly. "Yes, Lenny, I fancy he do."

"How much—'ow much you want for this monkey?" said Lenny to Tony. "How much?"

Tony gulped. "How—?"

"Yes, c'mon, c'mon! 'Ow much?"

"I—" Tony swallowed again, raised a shoulder, squirmed. "Da monk, Mistah Lord, he—er—he's part of my business."

"You can get another—'ow much?"

"I—er—" Tony wetted his fat lips. "You don' seem to understand, Mistah Lord—"

"Fiver."

"Mistah Lord—"

"Tenner."

"Mistah Lord—"

"All right. I'll make a deal. You want to go back to Italy, you say? O.K. How much did you lay on the Iti? Twenty, wasn't it? O.K., 'ere!" Lenny took a roll of pound notes from his pocket, peeled off twenty of them. He slapped them in Tony's hand. "There's your money back. Now, blow!" He pulled a rather bemused Alec off Tony's chest. "Come to Lenny, monkey, come to Lenny!"

Tony looked down at the sweet sterling that lay in his hand. Twenty pounds! It was all back. Every penny he had laid with the Lord—it was all back. Vittoria—Vittoria—the wedding—that was back too. But the monk, he was not back.

"Mistah Lord—" he began.

"Beat it," said Lenny, tickling Alec under the chin. "Bitty—witty—witty!" he cooed at the monkey. "Is liddle Alec goin' to go 'ome with Lenny? Is he, is he?"

"The man's talkin' to you, Lenny," reminded Big Jim.

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" I'm not interested," replied Lenny, still playing with Alec. " I've given 'im his dough back. What more's he want?"

" But my monk, Mistah Lord."

" Look," said Lenny sharply, glancing up at last. " This bird, Vittoria—what's she to you? You want to marry her or somethin'? All right! Who's it to be—the monk or the bird?"

It was a momentous decision for Tony to make. He looked down at Alec who, finding the Lord's canary-coloured cardigan comfortable and warm, was reasonably content, and then, in his mind's eye, at Vittoria. Both were attractive in their way, but Vittoria perhaps a shade more so.

" I—"

" Well?"

" Well—" and then Tony thought *not* of Vittoria but of her four brothers, especially the one in the carabinieri. He loosened his collar nervously. No, not that—he was only thirty-four. He had many good years in front of him.

" Ha, ha! Sure, sure, Mistah Lord! Who I want, ha? Alec or Vittoria? Sure! Well, I—" he glanced at Alec who by this time had his brown eyes fixed steadily on him. Guiltily Tony looked away. " Well, I want Vittoria, of course! Sure! I want Vittoria!" Alec's eyes hardened. " I—" Tony, catching the look, winced and turned aside. Then, unable to stand in the presence of the disillusioned Alec any longer, Tony Mazziotti, ice-cream vendor, traitor to the partner who had helped him build up his business, flung out of the stadium, shedding scalding tears of shame.

At breakfast next morning, Lenny the Lord and Big Jim had a serious discussion. " Jim," said Lenny.

" Yes, Lenny?" said Jim.

" We got to think of Alec's future. We got to make certain he don't stray."

" Yes, Lenny," said Jim.

" Pass me that dish."

Jim passed the dish and Lenny got up from the table. He walked over to the armchair where Alec was sitting behind a barricade of peanut-shells—the remains of six pounds' worth of nuts Lenny had bought him the night before for breakfast.

" Sorry to disturb you at mealtimes," said Lenny, with one of those courteous flourishes that had earned him the title of Lord. " But this got to be done, Alec." He took a dollop of butter from the dish Jim had handed to him and smeared a little on each of Alec's paws. " There! Now you don' go back to Tony. You stay with Lenny."

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Alec looked down at his greasy paws and then up at his new owner. By the look on his face, he seemed to consider Lenny as nutty as the nuts in the bag.

There was no prouder book-maker in town than Lenny when he walked into the Horse and Jockey to take the mid-morning bets. With Alec on his shoulder like a raven and Jim at his side like a retainer, he looked like some medieval nobleman.

"May my blood run backwards!" gasped Manchester Mike, the landlord. "What on earth's he got there?"

Lenny looked round the punters and book-makers present. "Meet Alec," he said, taking the monkey off his shoulder and seating him on the bar. "Alec—my business associates."

But Alec didn't seem to take to Lenny's commercial comrades. His eyes darted from one to another—from Pig-Face Mahoney to Little Sam—and then, opening his mouth wide, he began to squeal the place down.

"Whee! Whee! Whee! Awhee!" he screamed, and Manchester Mike stiffened with horror.

"For lord's sake, Lord!" he gasped. "Stop monkey yelpin'!"

That was a little more difficult to do than any of them imagined. Sweet and soothingly though Lenny spoke to him, Alec continued to scream his head off and, at length, the company resorted to subterfuge.

Pig-Face Mahoney, who had got that name, anyway, through eating too much, produced a steak-and-kidney pie from his pocket and offered it to Alec. Alec fell silent for a moment and curiously examined the pie. He sniffed it, clawed at it, turned it over in his paws and then, when everybody thought he was going to take a bite at it, suddenly changed his mind, and hurled it at Little Sam.

Little Sam had no need to duck—even if he had wanted to. His legs were so short he barely reached up to the bar as it was and the pie sailed harmlessly over his head.

Well, almost; as it happened, it caught Pig-Face Mahoney in the mouth but, as he was partial to pies anyway, he didn't really mind.

Then uproar reigned. Elated with his initial success, Alec looked round for further missiles to hurl and he picked on a pewter mug. *This* he threw into the mirror over the bar. Next came an ashtray. That landed equidistant between a bottle of Advocaat and a baby Bass.

A half-pint glass went through the window, a pint measure to the floor and, with a soda siphon splashing everyone in sight, the orgy came to an end.

Silence fell upon the bar. Lenny the Lord wiped his soda-

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splashed face with a silk handkerchief and turned to Big Jim.

"Jim," he said.

"Yes, Lenny?" said Jim.

"Fancy Alec's off it a bit this mornin'."

"Yes, Lenny," said Jim.

A look at Manchester Mike who was mouthing a multitude of words but seemed to be having difficulty getting any of them out.

"Jim," said Lenny.

"Yes, Lenny?" said Jim.

"I think we'd better get out of 'ere."

"Yes, Lenny," said Jim.

And they did—a fifth of a second before an empty whisky bottle, hurled this time by the gentleman from Manchester, smashed on the door that was rapidly closing behind them.

That somewhat disturbing incident was one of many that occurred in the ensuing weeks. An animal-lover, attracted to Alec in the street, attempted to engage him in animal chatter. Alec seemed to think her a dead loss and, fed to the teeth with her boo-boo's and coo-coo's, smacked her such a wallop on the nose that he broke her glasses. Lenny received a claim for damages.

Later, a waiter in one of the few sensible restaurants in town who didn't object to monkeys, saying he had had one himself and knew they enjoyed it, set a plate of rice-pudding before Alec. Alec *didn't* enjoy it. In fact, he poured the whole lot over a fellow diner's head and shoulders, with the result that Lenny received not only a bill for a brand-new suit but for a silver-grey *toupet* as well. It got so that, eventually, he dared not take Alec anywhere, and, with a mound of solicitors' letters and county-court summonses piling up all round him, he decided to call yet another conference with Jim.

"Jim."

"Yes, Lenny."

"Alec, he's ruinin' us. We got to do somethin' about it."

"Yes, Lenny."

"Maybe he's sickenin' for somethin'. Maybe his guts is bad or 'is 'ead an' it's makin' him bad-tempered."

"Yes, Lenny," said Jim.

"We'll call in a vet." So they called in a vet. He was a young man in a white coat whose surgery was in a van. He didn't seem to be doing too well to Lenny and Jim, for he appeared to depend for a living on coins dropped into a box. Only the best was good enough for Alec, and they viewed the upstart with some suspicion.

"Well, what's the trouble?" the young man asked when their turn came to enter his gipsy-like abode.

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Lenny glanced at Jim. Should they proceed with this quack or not?

"Well?" prompted the young man. "Is it the monkey?"

Lenny nodded.

"Yes. We fancy 'is gu—his belly's bad."

"Oh? Well, let's have a look at him." He reached out for Alec. Lenny pulled him away. The young man blinked. "It's all right," he said, with a reassuring smile. "You shall have him back."

Lenny's eyes darted about the young man's face. He couldn't be more than twenty-three and his countenance was as smooth as a girl's. The veterinary surgeons Lenny had known on the tracks had been crotchety old men who wore breeches and pork-pie hats.

"Oh, come along, come along," said the youngster. "I'm sure I can fix him up. Besides, I've a lot of other patients to see to this morning."

Aha . . . a lot of other patients, eh? Then perhaps the kid was smarter than he looked? Sure, he had the brains but he didn't have the cash, hence the van. And those letters P.D.S.A. that were splashed all over it—that was a flash—like a book-maker's board to draw clients in. Lenny had sized him up all right. Nobody put much across Lenny. He passed Alec over.

"Mm . . . mm . . ." hummed the young man, pressing Alec here and there—it relieved Lenny to see that, at least, he had all the patter. "There doesn't seem to be much wrong with his tummy."

"No? Well, perhaps it's his 'ead?"

"His 'ea—his head?" repeated the young man. "Well, animals *do* have headaches, of course. But if he—er—?"

"Oh, three times a day regular."

"I see. Well . . ." The young man seemed a little puzzled. "Yes. Well! What if you told me a little more about him?"

So, with Jim putting in the twiddly bits, Lenny recounted all that had occurred in the past few weeks. The young man seemed much affected by the tale. In fact, so affected was he that he appeared to find it difficult to look at Lenny while he was talking and at the end of the story had large, sparkling tears standing in his eyes. Lenny was touched to see him so sympathetic. After a hearty blow of his nose and a spate of throat-scraping, the young man put on a grave, grave expression and addressed the softened-up Lenny in a most solemn manner.

"Yes. Well, I can quite understand your being worried. But really, you know, I don't think Alec's trouble is physical at all. It's more likely to be spiritual."

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"Er—Lenny," began Jim. "What's he mean by—?"

Lenny pressed his foot. "The gentleman's talkin', Jim."

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, I'll tell you when we get 'ome!" snapped Lenny.

"Alec's trouble is probably spiritual. He needs companionship."

"But he got it—Jim an' me."

"Yes, but of his own kind." And the veterinary surgeon scrutinized both Jim's and Lenny's features thoroughly. "Er—I mean *really* his own kind," he said, dropping his gaze. "The Zoo, for instance. If you want my honest opinion, I think *that's* the place for him."

"The Zoo?"

"The Zoo. Monkeys are gregarious, you know."

"Er—Lenny, what's he mean by—ouch!"

"Of course, of course," said the Lord. "But the thought of Alec be'ind all them bars, doc—vet—it—well, don' know whether I'd sleep nights, thinkin' about it."

The young man smiled. "I can quite understand. But, really, they're awfully well looked after, you know."

"Yes . . . yes, I s'pose they are. But—well, I dunno." He turned to Jim. "What you think about it, Jim?"

Jim frowned heavily in thought. He stroked his double chin, played with a button on his bursting waistcoat.

"Well," he pronounced, at last, "if the vet thinks he's got gregarious and the Zoo's the place to cure it, let 'im go to the Zoo, I say."

That decided it. Alec went to the Zoo.

If Alec's presence was a source of worry to Lenny, his absence caused him even greater stress. What he had told the veterinary surgeon about not sleeping came to pass and for weeks on end he went around looking like a zombie. Neither was his mind on his work.

Even Manchester Mike was disturbed—and, heaven knows, after what Alec had done to his pub, *he* had little cause to concern himself—and it was Manchester Mike, in fact, who made the first real move to get at the root of Lenny's fretting.

"Lenny," he said one day, as the Lord lay wilting over a beer, "lads are gettin' a mite worried over thee. What's up—is it the monkey?"

Lenny nodded sadly.

"'Appen you're afraid he's not bein' treated right, eh?"

Lenny shook his head in denial.

"Then what, lad, what?"

Lenny heaved a heavy sigh.

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" Well, it—it's just that I miss 'im, Mike—miss 'im somethin' chronic, sometimes."

" Oh well, if it's *that* bad, lad, only thing to do is to bring him home again."

" Yes . . . yes." Suddenly Lenny made up his mind. He slipped off the bar-stool. " Mike," he said, with great deliberation. " I'm goin' to do it. I'm goin' to bai—get Alec out. As you say, it's the only thing, Mike, the only thing." He reflected a moment, his lips pursed in a determined line. " Yes! " He picked up his glass and knocked back what was left of his beer.

" Mike," he said, looking Manchester straight in the eyes. " You're a friend—a real friend. And I refutiate all I've said be'ind your back about you bein' a Lancashire basket." He went out firmly resolved.

Naturally, as Jim was by way of being a co-guardian, he was invited to accompany Lenny to the Zoo, and the pair set off like a couple of doting parents starting out to remove an only son from a boarding-school they had bitterly regretted ever having put him in. On the way, they passed the time making a little book—even money which of them would pick out Alec first, evens also which of them Alec would first run to.

On the first bet they dead-heated. They recognized him simultaneously. He was sitting high up on the rockery, stuffing a banana. Beside him—they seemed to keep apart from the other monkeys—was a slightly smaller companion, also gorging the fruit.

" There he is," said Lenny, proudly.

" Yes, Lenny, there he is," said Jim.

They began to shout and wave at Alec—and a mother with a child close by swiftly drew her offspring to her bosom and, with a look of alarm, made off down the pathway.

" Hey, Alec, Alec! " shouted Lenny. " Come on down 'ere! Come on down! It's me—me an' Jim! "

Alec stopped eating for a moment and stared hard at them both. And then, with a squeal of elation, he came scampering down the rockery towards them. It was difficult to say which of them he had recognized first and the bet relating to that particular had, therefore, to be called off.

" Ho, ho! 'Ow are you, eh? 'Ow are you? " greeted Lenny, pushing his fingers through the wire netting to touch him. " 'Ow they treatin' you, son, 'ow they treatin' you? "

Alec jumped up and down in a pet of excitement and gibbered with delight. Lenny, for his part, was almost sick with parental affection.

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" Thought we'd left you 'ere for keeps, did you, kid? " said he. " Well, we didn't, see. You're comin' 'ome—yes, with Jim an' me. An' it don't matter *who* you slosh in the chops in future, you won't be comin' *'ere* again! "

Had they gained permission for his removal at that moment, there was little doubt that Alec would have gone away with them happily enough, but, as it was, and while Lenny was still talking to him, the monkey who had been with Alec on the rockery now came bounding down to join him at the fence. It pushed itself in between him and Lenny and looked up suspiciously into Lenny's face. It sniffed, came a shade closer, sniffed again, and then put both its arms about Alec's body.

" Well, what you think of that? " said Lenny, laughing. " See, Jim, we're not the only ones in the world as is fond of Alec! "

That was truer than Lenny thought. Not only was the other monkey *fond* of Alec, she—and it *was* a she—was madly and possessively in love with him. She continued to glare at Lenny and Jim with malignant eyes a while longer and then, catching Alec by the arm, began to tug him away from the wire netting.

" Hey! 'Old on, 'old on! " shouted Lenny, good-humouredly. " We want *'im*. We're takin' 'im 'ome with us! "

These words only made the female pull more strenuously. As for Alec—he was fighting a battle of conflicting emotions. One stream moved him in the direction of Lenny and Jim, the other towards his spouse. Lenny began to look anxious.

" Looks like we got some competition, Jim," he said. " See! She's crackers about 'im." He decided to appeal generously to the female. " Look—er—Mrs. Alec, we don' want to break up the 'appy 'ome or anythin' like that, but—" and he stopped, for the female was gazing directly at him. Gone from her eyes now was the expression of malignancy—in them, instead, was a look of pathetic supplication. Seeing the look, Lenny shuffled uncomfortably. " As I was sayin'—" he began again—and again stopped. The female had turned her gaze on him once more and added to that appealing look a beseeching whimper. Lenny wetted his lips and clenched his fists.

" What's the matter? " asked Jim.

" I don' know. I think it's that female. She's doin' it on me."

" Doin' it on you? "

" Yes, makin' me feel like I was pinchin' Alec off 'er."

" Well, you are."

" I know. But I don't know whether I should. After all, they're 'itched up like, aren't they? I mean, 'ow would *you* feel if someone swiped *your* bit of candy? "

Jim nodded. " See your point."

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In the meantime, Alec had also begun to have pangs of conscience. While Lenny and Jim were talking, he himself had started chattering to his doxy, swiftly and persuasively, but apparently with little effect. Each second, she grew to look more and more despondent and eventually, with drooping shoulders, began to walk away.

Alec called to her or, rather, squeaked after her, but she paid no attention to him and, at length, reached the foot of the rockery. There, she paused and cast a long, lingering look in Alec's direction. Alec seemed to crumble. A worried expression came into his eyes and he glanced upwards at Lenny and Jim. The gaze seemed to convey the intelligence that, grateful though he was for their efforts to remove him from the Zoo, he felt, nevertheless, that duty compelled him to stay.

The message delivered, he then raised a paw to doff a pillbox hat that was no longer there, gave them a last, parting glance, and then ambled off to join his lady-love. He put an arm about her shoulders, she responded by putting hers about his waist and, together, they moved up the rockery, over the top of it, and out of sight.

Lenny stood there a long time, looking after him. Then, with a sigh, he turned to Jim.

"Well, Jim, that's that."

"Yes, Lenny, that's that," said Jim.

"Yes—that's that." Lenny allowed his gaze to rest on the rockery a moment longer, then began to move away. "Well, come on, Jim," he said. "Let's get back to the ponies."

"To the ponies—yes, Lenny," said Jim.

★ ★ ★

SUNSET, WITH CHIMNEYS

The cardboard chimneys lean, as black as ink,
Against the sky—and that is Shocking pink.
Sun's gone away, but somehow leaves behind
A slice of something like a melon rind:
The saffron moon, who, perched above it all,
Sleeps on her back upon a watchet wall.
The single star, forerunner of the crowd,
Drifts to the zenith on a passing cloud
While swarthy vapours, gathered in the East,
Grimly look on, like mourners at a feast.
Shudders the man of taste: Too highly coloured!
The man of taste, as ever, is a dullard.

R. P. LISTER

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CUP FINAL

All friends at football, fellows all in field
Harry, and Dick, and George

SIR J. OLDCASTLE, 1600

Comes the whistle, Preep!—*the kick-off.*
Attanan!
Spiggotty quickens, whips the ball
over to Titchy, who starts forward,
running hard, and rushes it through
neatly to Snoopy out on the wing.
White backs scattering, starting shaky.
Snoopy, loping, dribbles cleverly
with cunning foot-cleave, and drives down,
sending to-midst, but over-shooting.
Grisly, the White back, leaps to ward:
Titchy, outrunning him, tricking it sideways,
nearing the goal but running too fast,
seeks a shot but trips feebly.
Duffy, the goalie, fumbles forth,
Snoopy, the forward, swoops in!
The goalie gets it between his gloves,
dodging aside and bouncing the ball,
fussing to kick free, flinging overhead,
while Tumpy, the right back, heaving at it,
shoots! . . . but wide of the post. Preep!

MORRIS COX, *The Football Match*

Try

Isabel stood rather gravely by and watched the game.

"We appear to be winning," said Perrin, glaring as he spoke at three small boys who had looked up at the sound of his voice. "We appear—um—to be winning. Morton has secured a try."

"Yes, I'm so glad," gasped Mrs. Comber—she was out of breath. "Morton's a nice boy—we had him once in our house, and I do hope the school will win, because it's so nice for everybody's tempers, and the boys like it—and there's that nice Mr. Traill playing and running about most beautifully."

Perrin started. He hadn't noticed that Traill was playing. He looked at Isabel and saw that she was watching the game with deep attention. Traill was certainly in his element. The ball came suddenly in his direction. He had it in his hands and was off with it. There was a breathless, hushed pause; then, as he

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sped along, just inside the touch-line, swerved past his opposing three-quarter to the centre of the field, and flew for the goal, the silence broke into a roar. Miss Desart gave a long-drawn "Oh!" Mrs. Comber a little scream, Mr. Perrin moodily stroked his moustache.

The back was outwitted and came floundering to the ground—a very pretty try.

"Good old Traillers!" "That's something like!" "Isn't he spiffing?"—and then Miss Desart's "Oh! that was splendid!" beat about Mr. Perrin's poor head, that was aching horribly.

"That nice Mr. Traill! I do like to see people run like that. Oh! it's half-time."

HUGH WALPOLE, *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill*

Association Rules

Now let the blithe fierce frolic take control
Of doubt and destiny. For this brief span
Of stress and conflict I am partisan,
Wearing the colours, sure of gain and goal.
Now man is stripped of economic man.
Scruple and prejudice may flee the soul
To be confined by touch-lines. Now declare
The innocent strict discipline of play
And let a whistle rule the guileless day.
Now, unrepetitive as birds through air
The patterned fancies of the game array,
Boy's fleetness, man's sagacity, that flair
The sweet immortals cheered in Attic sun
Where games immortally were lost and won.

JOHN PUDNEY, *Sixpenny Songs*

Penalty

But the star of the Wanderers was A.F. (later Lord) Kinnaird, their captain, who was to play in nine Cup Finals for this team and the Old Etonians. He wore long white trousers and a cricket cap and boasted a blazing red beard as long and magnificently airborne as W.G.'s own. Charles Fry tells the bloodcurdling story of Sir Francis Mandarin calling on Kinnaird's mother, who tremulously feared that dear Arthur would one day return from that horrid rough football with a broken leg. "Never mind," said Mandarin, "*it won't be his own.*"

DENZIL BATCHELOR, *Soccer*

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Football Grounds of the Riviera

Rock-cut, railway-flanked, with sea edging its flat
Surface, Monaco hangs top-heavy over the dwarfed white posts:
Casinos and aquariums bulge above the crenellated coast,
Arc-lights strung along the Stadium like cloche hats.
Below, the pitch is smooth as green Casino baize
Whose wheels spin over water pink with haze.
Coated in sunset, the harbour's neat, dark palms,
Like roulette players, keep stiff their salt-drenched arms.

Scrambling over bald, dusty but flower-scented ground,
Cactus gesticulating, olive-edged, makeshift and public-owned,
Ventimiglia's forwards fan out round Bordighera's goal,
Jerseys striped like fishes in a noisy shoal.
Mountains bisect the sky with rocky signature
And sea-air modifies the players' temperature.
Mauve waves grow taut and spray the piazza pines,
As fishing boats trail their lamps in golden lines.

Menton at home to Nice, the French League leaders,
Sun only a rind squeezed dry of its heat,
And below us the voices of bathers scratch
At the cellophane air, airing ignorance of the match.
The tide recedes, drawing yachts in gentle retreat.
Outlined against mackerel sky, rock-bound readers
Golden indulgent flesh, absorbed in their books' spilled flush:
The frontier, insentient, hardens, the coastline in ambush.

ALAN ROSS

Foul!

Football is nothyng but beastely fury and extreme violence, whereof procedeth hurte, and consequently rancour and malice do remayne with thym that be wounded, wherfore it is to be put in perpetuall silence.

SIR THOMAS ELYOT, *c.* 1499–1546

All in the Game

Then strip, lads, and to it, though sharp be the weather,
And if, by mischance, you should happen to fall,
There are worse things in life than a tumble on heather,
And life is itself but a game at football.

SIR WALTER SCOTT, *Song on the lifting of the banner of the House of Buccleuch at a great football match on Carterhaugh, December 5th*, 1815

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SPANISH GOLD

**On the cream-white sand
the sea grapes would fall like amethysts**

by DOROTHY COTTRELL

BLACK Daniel, making his way towards his boat, turned from the forest path into the heart-leaved trees to see the cottage. And the filtered green light, falling through the leaves, touched the gleaming black skin of his great arms with glints of green, and leopard-spotted his worn blue dungarees with azure of light and cobalt of shadow, while his bare black feet made no sound on the petrified coral and the patches of humus.

Parting the last leaves, as always, he stopped in front of the cottage, and, as always, the strongest emotions left in his life rose up in him—adoration, tenderness, a desire to protect and make perfect.

The cottage had been built many years ago, and for many years had stood empty. It stood by itself in a little bay amongst the trees whose leaves were heart-shaped and delicately green as elms in first leaf. Its shutters were grey and broken, its door hung crazily, but the walls of cut coral rock were three feet thick and sturdy.

Daniel had peeped in many times, and the floors were of coral flagstones and there was a fireplace with low stone dogs on either side of it. From the windows, you saw the spring green of the leaves and the blue fire of the sea. The roof was of hand-cut shingles, silver-grey to the elements, dark and bloody amber within. Cool airs marched in and out. The garden was now full of saplings and tall weeds, and sprawled with pink-flowered coralline, but its fence of mahogany pickets was iron-sound.

As Daniel stood in front of it, he saw it both as it was and as it would be if he owned it. The first thing he would do would be to make a thatch-palm broom and sweep the stone floors; then he would scrub them with sand and sea-water until they were as cool as they were clean—and all the while, the cool air would sing through the trees. Then he would repair the shutters and the wide, perfect door, so that the house was no longer shamed by their askewness.

After that, he could go slowly, adorning the cottage as a man might adorn a woman. He would keep every fluttering tree, for

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they would say, " Welcome home, Daniel! " whenever he came home. But he would clear the weeds and saplings and level the yard. He would spread the garden with cream-white sand on which the sea grapes would fall like amethysts. Beside the door he would set a great croton bush, so black it was like the last dark of sunset, so splashed with bloody fire that it was like a burning forest through midnight trees: a bush, stiff and polished and flashing back the West Indian sun.

His garden would be of seashells set in the sand, after the way of " low-island " gardens. From door to gate there would be twin borders of great conch shells, face up, pink and rose and orange and fading buff, coloured like sunset and the evening sea. Then on the perfect sand would be smaller beds of leopard cowries, tortoise-shell and henna; violet cowries like beds of purple pansies; proud beds of dried lilac sea-plumes and snowy coral shapes.

He would whitewash the picket fence. He would paint the doors and shutters sky-blue as his catboat so that they were like fallen patches of the sky caught on his own cottage, and he would whitewash the walls. He would find the oldest mahogany of the forest and make furniture, and in the evenings, he would polish it until it burnt a liquid red or copper-brown as the light caught it.

Then he would embroider patchwork curtains and a quilt for the bed. His fancywork was one of the things for which they laughed at him, but since they laughed in any case, this did not matter. The patchwork would not be a plain joining of squares and pieces; it would be made of endless tubes of material gathered into innumerable fluted flowers of faint pink and blue and cream, and mounted on strong calico, so that the curtains and the bed were flower gardens from fairyland.

At the end of all, he would buy a cat—a pearl-grey cat with soft fur and quick feet—and it would be glad when he came home and would arch under his hand. And he would draw its tail gently through his hand, and it would purr.

These dreams were so vivid that when they melted backwards into the twin realities of the dilapidated cottage and the fact that Daniel would never own the cottage, it struck him with the force of an actual loss. He almost felt as if he had owned the cat and it had died. He felt tears behind his eyelids for the non-existent cat, for the brilliance and perfection of the cottage as it could be and was not.

Threading the last stunted mangroves bordering the sound, he considered the three things that put the cottage beyond his reach: the islands were poor; he was black; he was simple. It

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took him longer to think of things than it took other men; longer to make a reply. But he was also much closer to the birds and the animals and the insects than were normal people; so that among the things that made people laugh at him were his habit of diving for crayfish and bringing them up by hand, instead of using grains to spear them, and his way of nursing sick birds or small animals.

It was from his love of watching small natural things that his one hopeless hope of obtaining the cottage sprang. He noted now that the sound was full from the east wind and that where the salt water lapped in round the little mangroves it was very clear; part sky-reflections, part glimpses of submerged roots and rock, part shadow-patterns of the little trees.

And on the exposed rock were segmented ice-plants and the brighter green of purslane—that had made new leaves since yesterday—while the lappety, floppety slap of the sea was a whisper and a running tune.

He had not always been thus. At twenty-five he had been the young captain of a black-crewed ship. Briefly ashore, he had been preparing dynamite to blast a better passage through the reef. And his wife, who had been his wife for but a week, had asked him to take the explosive from the house, and he laughed at her fears and moved to kiss her in young power, and there had been an accident that could not happen, and she had died at his feet, while, dazed by the explosion, he leaned against the wall, staring down at her.

Now his quilts and embroideries were the most beautiful in the islands. Each year he sold one quilt locally to pay for materials and for the postage on the rest, which were sent to delight children who would never walk again—and of whom it was something of a mystery that Daniel had ever heard—in a country that he had never seen.

He also acted as watchman at the custom-house, sleeping and cooking in an iron lean-to at its rear—an area which he kept clean as a surgical ward. So that one of his proud moments had been when the Commissioner had arrived from Main Island for his annual visit and had inspected the custom-house and asked who kept it so clean. And Daniel had hoped that the Commissioner might know that it was his careful handiwork.

But he had seen that the half-caste customs official was about to claim the credit, when Granny Fich spoke up and said, "That lazy stuff-shirt never come near it except to rob someone! It's Daniel keeps it clean!"

And the Commissioner had raised English eyebrows, looked at Daniel, and asked, "That so?"

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"Yes, sir, your honour," Daniel had said softly.

"Who makes the quilts back there?"

Daniel could not answer. So again Granny Fich explained that it was Daniel—and what he did with them.

The Commissioner, resplendent in blue-and-gold uniform, had said, "Well, well! It's quite a credit to you, Daniel! If you ever need help, come to me."

That had made a warmness in Daniel's breast ever since. When the boys had teased or bullied him, it had been good to think that if Commissioner had known he would have put a stop to it!

Boarding his catboat now at his strut wharf on the island's uninhabited windward shore, he set off across the loneliness of the great sound towards the seven-mile-long rumble of the reef; mooring the boat an hour later where the sand-dunes cut in behind the reef's southern end.

Ashore, he crossed the dune to the beach. In the great blaze of light, the water met the sand in inch-high ripples, running under the light wind. It made a tiny, liquid slap. The beach itself was steep and damply hard. Small white shells, coral pebbles, and scraps of brown seaweed strewed it, and at its upper edge was a great, cushioned rick of brown seaweed and strawlike stems of vines, then the small vegetation of the dune, nowhere more than two feet high.

It was here that he had watched the great, ghostly blue-and-white land crabs playing, until he knew many things about them that most people did not know. For instance, they were both thieves and collectors, so that once, as he had been sitting here after paring mangoes for his lunch, they had nearly stolen his pocket-knife. Another time he had seen his handkerchief just disappearing into a crab hole.

And sometimes, if he lay quite still for hours, they would bring out their little treasures and play with them; solemnly lifting and lowering a large claw holding a sprig of palm seeds or a long bird feather or pebbles or scraps of glass or cloth. Frightened, they would still try to retrieve their possessions as they fled. But in haste the effort of holding something made them clumsy.

That was how he had been able to take away their Spanish coins—a large and elaborate coin of gold, three smaller, crude coins of silver. And one clicking, twelve-inch crab had had a woman's ear-ring with fine filigree work and a blue stone that was like the deepest water on the brightest day.

Where had they got them? Having thought for a long while, Daniel knew that it must have been as they searched clawingly

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amongst the wind-rows after storm had swept in the undersurface litter from the reef, or from the shoals and fissures beyond the reef. Thus somewhere in the inwardly lighted azure and cobalt out yonder might be an old ship or a ship's chest containing bright things—perhaps of enough value to let him buy the cottage.

For six months Daniel had searched through his water-glass from the boat or as he dived for crayfish. Then on a day when the sky was darkened to heavy, purple storm-light through which the sun broke in shafts of white fire, in the single illumination of a sun-ray amidst gloom, the underwater world had been visible through the water as if held in dark blue diamond.

And he had found the blue pit, just over the reef's back, due east of the crab dune. A cobalt-and-purple-walled submarine well, its bottom showing the fire-blue gleam of white sand, so that it seemed one looked through a dark tunnel at the sky, and towards the reef, into the deep shadows of a submarine cave where the fish passed tranquilly.

Diving with the aid of a stone, he saw that it was exactly such a place as that in which the wreckage of an old ship—or of many ships—might have lodged. But no one man, troubled by pressure, could hope to shovel away its sand. The cave, however, went backward and upward under the mass of the reef, so that there was even a small aperture into the green light of the sound, while to seaward, the lower wall of the well was but ten feet thick.

Thus, yesterday, Daniel had dynamited the seaward wall and blasted a wider underwater opening into the sound, so that as the sound emptied after the water had piled up under steady wind, the current would race through the cave and the pit and clear the sand. Today he would learn what was happening. And taking off his clothes as seabirds made thin cries, he coiled a light line over his shoulder and swam out through the lukewarm water.

Upon the reef, standing up to his waist in water, he found that the charging tumble of surf made it hard to see clearly. Having coiled the line round a stag-horn in case he might need it later for hauling, he waded along the western edge of the pit, peering downward, missed his footing, went under, and was fighting a down-pulling welter of currents that sent a vicious undertow into the deep.

With his great limbs fighting to take his body to the surface, he experienced a heart-checking moment in which he realized that he was not going to gain the surface. He had to go with the undertow, but where did the undertow go? Could he dive with it until its violence decreased? Or was it pouring down a submarine sluiceway that would drown him under a darkening

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weight of water before he broke free? Through his increasing pain for air shot anxiety as to what would happen to his varied pets. He felt fury at his own stupidity.

Suffering, he swam with all his strength with the current that still would not let him rise. His lungs cried for breath, and the normal world of sky and air seemed an unattainable heaven. His heart shook his throat in shocks of pain. The moment when his agonized lungs would defy his will and gulp water was upon him—and then the down-pull of the current decreased, fanning outward, and he began to shoot up!

He broke water, and found himself sobbing for air in the trough of shoreward-marching waves.

Again upon the reef, shaking with strain and breathing hard as he sat on a washing coral head, he watched the sand boils eddying far out upon the surface of the sea and hoped that he had not loosed too savage a flood through the pit. Then, as the gold ball of the sun sank in the hazed sky, the sea grew pale blue-silver and the sky faintly pink, and slowly the sand boils diminished as the level of sound and sea equalized themselves.

When the sun was a huge, red-orange ball upon lilac, Daniel dived again into the pit, that was menacing now with shadows. The remaining current was merely a gentle pressure upon his body, but the sand floor had lowered until naked rock shoulders showed.

And upon the floor were many things—old anchors and scraps of rusted anchor chain, ancient planking taken by coral, a fourteen-inch-long, oblong block crusted with darkly oxidized lime and almost too heavy to raise. And a flattish, coral-laced, and incredibly heavy object that was smooth upon one side and queerly convoluted upon the other.

After his third ascent for air, Daniel got a line upon both the flat thing and the block. And having rested in the twilit wash of the reef, he hauled them up. Then he went for his boat.

By the light of a scrap-wood fire on the dune, he chipped away the oxidization from the block and saw time-polished silver, inscribed with Roman numerals and the Cross of Spain. Careful scraping away of the coral lace from the smaller, flat object showed him the golden face; strange, still, and coldly beautiful, looking up at him in the firelight with the scorn of lost ages.

And suddenly the surrounding darkness was a terror that might take both gold and silver from him.

At three o'clock in the morning, when the breadfruit trees were making black patterns on the stars, Daniel woke Granny Fich. The old lady, answering his knock, wore a pair of navy-

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blue ski trousers—very suitable for foiling the mosquitoes—rubber-soled canvas shoes, a pink nightgown, and a tartan shawl. Her silver hair was in curlers.

"*What in damnation do you want at this time of the morning?*" she inquired amiably. Which was nice of her, because, even for one endowed with her splendid health, having fits was a very hard way for an old lady to earn her living—and on boat days such as this, she might have to have three fits in a single afternoon.

"Granny Fich, ma'am, may I come in?" Daniel said, staggering under the weight of the burlap-wrapped objects in his arms.

"Since you have to come in or I have to come out, come in!"

Daniel tottered after her to set his burden carefully on the red-ochre-rubbed floor.

Granny Fich went to the combustion-burner kerosene stove. "I'll make mint tea. What in heaven's name have you got there?"

Daniel, wiping his forehead, had lost the power of speech. Kneeling, he unwrapped the burlap, and as the things in it turned over, the heaviness of the soft bumps made the floor jump.

Granny Fich, having seen the stove through its initial conflagration, came to look down as he freed the last burlap fold. She gave a long whistle and ran to close the shutters.

"You think that they are of walue, ma'am, Granny Fich?" Daniel asked.

The old lady looked long. "I'm no expert, but I'd say the bar was worth more money than you and I have ever earned or seen—and the face worth more than all the people of the island have ever made or seen! You are a very rich man, Daniel."

"Only if Commissioner will tell me what to do with them, Granny, ma'am—and I do not know how to get them to Commissioner," Daniel said desperately. "I do not think wery well, Granny, ma'am."

He touched the still, golden cheeks of the face with his fingers. "I dare not write to Commissioner, lest others read the letter and tell those I would not trust. If I go to Commissioner without proof, he will doubt. But I do not know how to take the face and the bar without all learning of it, and taking them away!" He wiped his face, as he knelt, looking up at her.

"We shall have coffee instead of mint!" Granny Fich said recklessly. She put her hand on Daniel's woolly head. "You are a good man, Daniel—and good men have disappeared for a handful of old doubloons! You must be very careful! Do not trust anyone—You shouldn't have trusted me!"

She stood with her feet apart and scratched her head. Later, she said, "The face, you might be able to take in a crate of sugar melons—inside one of the melons."

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" The case would be wery heavy," Daniel said doubtfully.

" Yes, and the face and the bar together will be heavier! And someone will have to help you lift the case. But if you got there late—almost as the ship was ready—and if there was a diversion . . . No! The blamed things would be too heavy and someone would notice . . . But if you had some stones in the crate, now—that were really pumice—you just might get away with it. People would see what looked like stone and think that was the weight."

" But what of the other end—at Main Island? "

" If there is a fuss there, at least his honour will be there, and they won't dare to stop him hearing of it. It's not perfect, but it's all I can think of."

" Thank you, Granny, ma'am! "

The dock where the white motor ship berthed was a long, sheer-sided, and flattened platform cut from the coral limestone and showing lilac against the bottle-pale water that was full of little, swimming, shouting boys. More little boys, clad in scanty white singlets, swarmed over the edge of the dock and swung on the chains of hoists. Chickens cackled.

Girls in softly coloured dresses laughed behind bunches of red raisin peas and pink roses. Late arrivals dashed up on bicycles, carrying bunches of plantains and baskets of yellow wild almonds. Persons seeing persons off waved wildly. Sailors shouted, loading red dye-wood and green turtles. There was much clanking and whistling and an over-all buzz.

Threading the confusion of the dock with the crate of melons on his push-cart, Daniel was almost choked by the hammering of his heart. The melons and the stones that were really pumice looked innocent enough, but what of the perhaps still unexplained weight? Near the gangway, he stopped the cart. Granny Fich—giving a group of tourists misinformation on voodoo—waved to him.

He called to two of the sailors, " Please, would you help me with the melons? They are wery heavy."

As the sailors lifted, he tried to take as much of the weight of the crate as possible. And Granny Fich had a fit.

Sitting on the safely deposited crate of melons near the bow and wiping his face, Daniel saw with satisfaction that kindly tourists were proffering Granny an above-average quantity of dollars with which to obtain treatment for her affliction.

Then the Captain—an island man, but very grand in his uniform—paused briefly to ask, " Where are you taking the stones and the melons? "

" To Commissioner, Captain, sir."

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Then a sailor said to another, " Well, now, I surely feel like eating a good big melon! " But they were only joking.

Then the ship was under way, and still nothing had gone wrong.

Daniel was very thirsty, but he was not going to leave the melons unguarded for a little thing like a drink of water. If the melons failed to reach Commissioner, it should not be through carelessness. He still dared not hope too much. But it was as if each beat of the engines brought the cottage closer.

Main Island was blue between silver sea and early sky as they raised it at eight next morning, and the boarding officer and the government doctor came out. And Daniel lined up with the rest of the passengers, still trying to watch the melons.

As the doctor let him pull in his tongue, he asked, " Please, sir, doctor, is Commissioner well? "

" As far as I know," the doctor said, amused. " He's taking his annual leave of absence in Jamaica." And about Daniel the shining world fell.

Blocking the Captain's way ashore ten minutes later, he stammered, " Captain, sir! I cannot land here! I must, please, go on with the ship to Jamaica! "

" Well, talk to the mate! " the Captain said.

" That is of no use. I have no fare."

" Then you cannot go on."

" In Jamaica, I can pay! I have melons for Commissioner and specimens of rock. Commissioner will want to get what I have! "

The Captain hesitated. " Wery well. We'll take the crate and have it delivered to his honour. But you must get off here! Move from the plank, boy! "

" Commissioner said I was to come to him! I cannot send the melons. I must take the melons! Commissioner said—"

From behind Daniel, Mr. Marcomb Parsons, the Main Island attorney, said, " If his honour wants Daniel with the melons, his honour had better have melons served with Daniel! "

Daniel turned desperately to Mr. Parsons, who stood resplendent in white linen and Panama hat, twirling a Malacca cane.

" Yes," Mr. Parsons murmured to the cane, " his honour is a splendid administrator, but touchy—yes, touchy! He might react badly if anyone stopped a coloured boy doing what his honour had told him to do. I'll be seeing him myself when we reach Kingston."

It was known to everyone that Mr. Parsons and the Captain had no love for each other, and it was apparent to Daniel that Mr. Parsons was now enjoying bedevilling the Captain rather than taking an interest in Daniel's misfortunes.

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The Captain grew red above his gold-braided white collar, then looked irritably at Daniel, and muttered, "Wery well! Wery well! Stay with the confounded melons! But keep out from underfoot!"

"Thank you, Captain! Thank you, Mr. Parsons, sir!" Daniel said, humbly grateful for help, however motivated. Except for one well-timed dash for the water-cooler, he sat on the melons during the ship's stay at Main Island.

For the sailors kept saying, "Yes, sir, those melons surely look ready to eat to me!" Or, "Now I can see that Daniel wants us to have just one of Commissioner's melons!" And while they were only joking, a joke about the melons could lead to disaster.

He also wished that the cook did not produce such good smells from the galley or cry so loudly, "Come and get it while it's smoking hot! Fried crayfish tails and French-fried breadfruit sticks for lunch!" or "Turtle-meat pie with mango slices and honey under the crust for dinner; palm-cabbage salad and pine-apple on the side!" But if he went for a meal, the boys might open the crate as a joke.

When the ship set out over the dark green-and-rose of the twilight sea, he was very much alone with the melons. Lonely splashes of bow spray struck him. Even the rest of the ship seemed a long way off. Then there was darkness and big stars and the running lights, and the bow, held in the sound of waves and the tramp of engines, was a million miles from anywhere.

And in the crate—if he could get it to Commissioner—was the cottage and the cat, and coffee or real tea always instead of mint tea for Granny Fich. For in the crate was the bar that was worth much and the golden face that was worth more than all the money of all the island.

With dawn was a new fear. The melons were becoming over-ripe, and from the cut melons that hid the bar and the face, little rivers of fermented juice crept across the deck. Daniel wiped up the juice, but more came, and there was nothing he could do about the smell.

At eight o'clock, the mate stopped and sniffed. "Better let us eat what's still good of those melons, boy."

"No!" Daniel said.

"Then throw the lot overboard."

"No!" Daniel said wildly, bracing himself with his back to the crate.

The cook appeared, carrying the Captain's breakfast to the wheelhouse. On the tray were ship's biscuits that had been dipped in water, then fried to golden-brown balloons; two brown-shelled, boiled eggs; two crisp, minced-turtle-meat sausages

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seasoned with sage and onions; and a steaming cup of Cuban coffee. He called to everyone else to come and get it. "The rest's just as good!"

The mate hesitated, glanced at two grinning seamen, looked at Daniel; then tapped his forehead, shrugged, and went to breakfast. But at the same moment the Captain opened the sliding glass of the wheelhouse.

He sniffed. "Bodon, do you smell a wery peculiar smell?"

A young seaman stood at the Captain's elbow and a slow smile showed on his red-bronzed cheeks. "Yes, Cap'n, it's Daniel's melons, sir."

"Tell the mate to throw them overboard!"

Twenty minutes later he looked out again. "Mister Mate!"

Looking up, the mate explained, "Sir, he sits on top of the crate and he is wery strong and he cries out if we go to shift him."

"Just the same, mister, you are to throw those melons over the side!"

"No!" Daniel said, grasping the crate.

In the years that he had dreamt, it had not hurt too much only to dream. But now, for a little while, the dreams had turned to hopes—and in a moment all his hopes could be sinking in the sea.

He stammered wildly, "If you throw my melons over, I will jump over too!"

"Get a turtle-net!" the mate ordered. "He's insane!"

Leaning against the rail, Mr. Marcomb Parsons addressed the Captain, "Just been thinking, Captain. Of course, it's really quite absurd, but in that simple mind of his, Daniel attaches great importance to taking that box of melons to the Commissioner. Why not humour the poor fellow? We'll be in port tomorrow night. And as you know, Captain, Daniel has been a bit odd for some years now and there is quite a possibility that the grief of losing his melons—the frustration of his *idée fixe*, as it were—may completely unbalance him. And then where will you land him? No government wants the cost of caring for a deranged person."

He paused. "You might have to keep him on your ship indefinitely, you know. Sort of man without a country! I keep thinking of Haiti versus the S. S. Phoebus, and the Philippine Islands versus Harrington, Master Mariner."

"Nonsense!" the Captain said.

"And remember poor Waters who agreed to take that fellow who said he was an American, but wasn't? And the United States wouldn't let him in, Jamaica wouldn't take him back? Of course, he was able to do a little work on board, but poor old Captain Waters had to keep him for years."

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"Hold it a minute with that net, Mister Mate!" the Captain said.

"And, of course," Mr. Parsons said, "if Daniel should become violent, the court might possibly order you to carry a special attendant. Yes, if I were you, I'd have Daniel keep his melons and say no more about the matter."

"Mister Mate," the Captain ordered, "stop anyone interfering with Daniel! I'll be right down, myself!"

The Blue Mountains of Jamaica were rose and purple and the harbour very green as the motor ship docked in Kingston.

"Now, don't get anyone excited about him," the Captain said, referring to the customs officials and to Daniel. "Let me handle this."

"What's that?" the customs officer asked of the crate a little later.

"Just a crate of melons and some rock samples," the Captain said carelessly. "Commissioner Cardwell wants them for some seed experiment or other. Boy's taking them to him." The perspiration ran down his face.

"Seem to be bad," the customs officer said.

"Would have thrown half of them overboard days ago if I had had my way," the Captain said. "But seems his honour wants just this quantity of fruit for some reason or other."

"Get the things ashore and off the wharf!" the customs officer ordered Daniel.

There were some dreadful minutes in which Daniel had to leave the crate unguarded while he hired a push-cart. Arrived at the Commissioner's suburban address, he was very tired and very hungry, and this made it harder to think properly when the uniformed houseboy would not let him in.

"Still further, his honour has retired!" the houseboy said. His eyes indicated a lighted window above the court. "Now remove your trash!"

In his despair, Daniel stumbled and bumped against the crate, and a piece of overripe melon fell out and spattered over the court.

"Clean it up!" the houseboy said sternly. He shut the door.

Daniel knelt and began scooping up the melon fragments. Standing up with the last piece of melon in his hands, he looked longingly at the lighted window. He whispered, "Mr. Commissioner, sir."

But he was afraid of the resplendent houseboy—and Commissioner could not hear. How the fragment of melon flew from his hand to plop splatteringly on the window screen, he did not know.

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But from within the lighted room there was a roar, and Commissioner was at the window, throwing open the screen. Commissioner's heavy face was redder even than usual and Commissioner was rather badly spattered with melon-juice.

"Who did that? What's going on here?" Commissioner roared. "What lunatic is that down there?"

"It's me, Daniel, Commissioner, sir," Daniel stammered. "Just only Daniel!"

"I don't care if you're Daniel and the lions' den! What in damnation do you mean?" Commissioner wiped his sleeve. "Daniel? What Daniel?"

"You said to come, sir! If I needed help, you said—"

"Oh, you! The quilt-maker! Damnation, I didn't say to throw melons at me! What do you want?"

"To see you, sir, please! But it is in the melons, the treasure! I cannot leave it! I must bring the melons, sir!"

"I have not been known as a weak man. But we age," Commissioner said. "Come one, come all! Bring a whole field of melons! Damned overripe melons!"

"Now, you understand, Daniel?" Commissioner said in the solicitor's office a week later. "I want you to know what is happening. You found something enormously valuable."

He touched his fingers to the silken, dimpled surface of the silver bar. "Those Roman numerals are its weight—nine hundred and sixty ounces. This is the Cross of Spain. The scratched initials are the assayer's—the assayer tested the quality of the silver and weighed the bars for air bubbles. That deep scoop to the left of the Cross is the assayer's scoop—his payment. These letters say where it was smelted and its date. At any rate, the bar is worth much, but the golden she-devil's face there is so rare and so beautiful that it's worth many, many thousands of pounds.

"First, you must pay the Government its percentage upon a treasure find. You can sell the bar for vastly more than its weight in silver—vastly more! But then you have the choice of selling the face to a private collector for a very great sum or of selling it to the British Museum for a smaller sum—much smaller. If it goes to a private collector, only a few people will ever see it or enjoy it. If it goes to the Museum, many thousands of people will see it and enjoy it. In either case, you will have a great deal of money. In either case, I shall help you buy the cottage."

"And the cat?"

"And the cat. And I want to arrange a trust fund for you, so you will never again need to work for people who laugh."

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"Will little children see it in the Museum?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Especially the little children."

"If I have the cottage and the cat, it would be enough."

"You must have the trust fund I have spoken of—so that you can make more quilts."

"Then some for that. And I would like a little to go to Granny Fich so that she may have coffee or real tea instead of mint tea, and will not be worried any more that there is little left in the bank. For the rest, the Museum may have it."

"That is very generous. You are sure? It will carry your name, of course. We can't give credit to the melon, unfortunately!"

Daniel's brown eyes shone softly. "First, I shall sweep the floors, then scrub them with sand." He turned to the Commissioner with the pride of a householder. "Perhaps when Commissioner comes next to the island, he will take tea in my cottage?"

"I'd be proud to. Very proud indeed," the Commissioner said.

★ ★ ★

LITTLE ANGEL!

Like nine out of every ten actresses of my generation who started as children in stock companies, I appeared first as Little Willie in *East Lynne*. My principal recollection of the opening night has to do with my first attack of stage fright. As the pathetic (or bathetic) scene of Willie's death is less familiar to modern audiences than to their grandparents, perhaps I should explain the situation: Willie's mother, Lady Isabel, who some years previously had eloped with a lover, has returned to the house of her unforgiving husband in the guise of a French governess, in order to be near her dying child. Willie on his deathbed murmurs something about "seeing the angels," as a cue for the supposed Madame Vine's emotional outburst: "Dead! dead! And never called me Mother!"—in its time one of the best-known lines in British drama.

Well, as I lay there in Little Willie's cot, with Madame Vine bending tearfully over me, my mind went blank, and all I could say in a frightened whisper was: "Madame Vine! Madame Vine!" At this point I heard the hoarse voice of the stage manager in the wings bellowing: "See the angels! *See the angels*, you little b——!"

However, the curtain came down that night without my seeing any angels.

ADA REEVE, *Take It for a Fact*

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★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

H-TYPE RUUM

A grey spherical object rippled along with a weighty fluid motion

by ARTHUR PORGES

THE cruiser *Ilkor* had just gone into her interstellar overdrive beyond the orbit of Pluto when a worried officer reported to the Commander.

" Excellency," he said uneasily, " I regret to inform you that because of a technician's carelessness, a Type-H9 ruum has been left behind on the third planet, together with anything it may have collected."

The Commander's triangular eyes hooded momentarily, but when he spoke, his voice was level.

" How was the ruum set? "

" For a maximum radius of 30 miles, and 160 pounds plus or minus 15."

There was silence for several seconds, then the Commander said: " We cannot reverse course now. In a few weeks we'll be returning, and can pick up the ruum then. I do not care to have one of those costly, self-energizing models charged against my ship. You will see," he ordered coldly, " that the individual responsible is severely punished."

But at the end of its run, in the neighbourhood of Rigel, the cruiser met a flat, ring-shaped raider; and when the inevitable fire-fight was over, both ships, semi-molten, radio-active, and laden with dead, were starting a billion-year orbit around the star.

And on the earth, it was the age of reptiles.

When the two men had unloaded the last of the supplies, Jim Irwin watched his partner climb into the little seaplane. He waved at Walt.

" Don't forget to post that letter to my wife," Jim shouted.

" The minute I land," Walt Leonard called back, starting to rev the engine. " And you find us some uranium—a strike is just what Cele needs. A fortune for your son and her, hey? " His white teeth flashed in a grin. " Don't rub noses with any grizzlies —shoot 'em, but don't scare 'em to death! "

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Jim thumbed his nose as the seaplane speeded up, leaving a frothy wake. He felt a queer chill as the amphibian took off. For three weeks he would be isolated in this remote valley of the Canadian Rockies. If for any reason the plane failed to return to the icy blue lake, he would surely die. Even with enough food, no man could surmount the frozen peaks and make his way on foot over hundreds of miles of almost-virgin wilderness. But, of course, Walt Leonard would return on schedule, and it was up to Jim whether or not they lost their stake. If there was any uranium in the valley, he had twenty-one days to find it. To work, then, and no gloomy forebodings.

Moving with the unhurried precision of an experienced woodsman, he built a lean-to in the shelter of a rocky overhang. For this three weeks of summer, nothing more permanent was needed. Perspiring in the strong morning sun, he piled his supplies back under the ledge, well covered by a waterproof tarpaulin, and protected from the larger animal prowlers. All but the dynamite; that he cached, also carefully wrapped against moisture, two hundred yards away.

The first two weeks went by all too swiftly, without any encouraging finds. There was only one good possibility left, and just enough time to explore it. So, early one morning towards the end of his third week, Jim Irwin prepared for a last-ditch foray into the north-east part of the valley, a region he had not yet visited.

He took the Geiger counter, slipping on the earphones, reversed to keep the normal rattle from dulling his hearing, and reaching for the rifle, set out, telling himself it was now or never so far as this particular expedition was concerned. The bulky .30-06 was a nuisance and he had no enthusiasm for its weight, but the huge grizzlies of Canada are not intruded upon with impunity, and take a lot of killing. He'd already had to dispose of two, a hateful chore, since the big bears were vanishing all too fast. And the rifle had proved a great comfort on several ticklish occasions when actual firing had been avoided. The .22 pistol he left in its sheepskin holster in the lean-to.

He was whistling at the start, for the clear, frosty air, the bright sun on blue-white ice-fields, and the heady smell of summer, all delighted his heart despite his bad luck as a prospector. He planned to go one day's journey to the new region, spend about thirty-six hours exploring it intensively, and be back in time to meet the plane at noon. Except for his emergency packet, he took no food or water. It would be easy enough to knock over a rabbit, and the streams were alive with firm-fleshed rainbow trout of the kind no longer common in the States.

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All morning Jim walked, feeling an occasional surge of hope as the counter chattered. But its clatter always died down. The valley had nothing radio-active of value, only traces. Apparently they'd made a bad choice. His cheerfulness faded. They needed a strike badly, especially Walt. And his own wife, Cele, with a kid on the way. But there was still a chance. This last thirty-six hours—he'd snoop at night, if necessary—might be the pay-off. He reflected a little bitterly that it would help quite a bit if some of those fellows he'd staked would make a strike and return his dough. Right this minute, there was close to eight thousand bucks owing to him.

A wry smile touched his lips, and he abandoned unprofitable speculations for plans about lunch. The sun, as well as his stomach said it was time. He had just decided to take out his line and fish a foaming brook, when he rounded a grassy knoll to come upon a sight that made him stiffen to a halt, his jaw dropping.

It was like some enterprising giant's outdoor butcher's shop: a great assortment of animal bodies, neatly lined up in a triple row that extended almost as far as the eye could see. And what animals! To be sure, those nearest him were ordinary deer, bear, cougars, and mountain sheep—one of each, apparently—but down the line were strange, uncouth, half-formed, hairy beasts; and beyond them a nightmare conglomeration of reptiles. One of the latter, at the extreme end of the remarkable display, he recognized at once. There had been a much larger specimen, fabricated about an incomplete skeleton, of course, in the museum at home.

No doubt about it—it was a very small stegosaur, no bigger than a pony!

Fascinated, Jim walked down the line, glancing back over the immense array. Peering more closely at one scaly, dirty-yellow lizard, he saw an eyelid tremble. Then he realized the truth. The animals were not dead, but paralysed and miraculously preserved. Perspiration prickled his forehead. How long since stegosaurs had roamed this valley?

All at once he noticed another curious circumstance: the victims were roughly of a size. Nowhere, for example, was there a really large saurian. No tyrannosaurus. For that matter, no mammoth. Each specimen was about the size of a large sheep. He was pondering this odd fact, when the undergrowth rustled a warning behind him.

Jim Irwin had once worked with mercury, and for a second it seemed to him that a half-filled leather sack of the liquid metal had rolled into the clearing. For the quasi-spherical object moved with just such a weighty, fluid motion. But it was not leather;

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and what appeared at first a disgusting wartiness, turned out on closer scrutiny to be more like the functional projections of some outlandish mechanism.

Whatever the thing was, he had little time to study it, for after the spheroid had whipped out and retracted a number of metal rods with bulbous, lens-like structures at their tips, it rolled towards him at a speed of about five miles an hour. And from its purposeful advance, the man had no doubt that it meant to add him to the pathetic heap of living-dead specimens.

Uttering an incoherent exclamation, Jim sprang back a number of paces, unslinging his rifle. The ruum that had been left behind was still some thirty yards off, approaching at that moderate but invariable velocity, an advance more terrifying in its regularity than the headlong charge of a mere brute beast.

Jim's hand flew to the bolt, and with practised deftness he slammed a cartridge into the chamber. He snuggled the battered stock against his cheek, and using the peep sight, aimed squarely at the leathery bulk—a perfect target in the bright afternoon sun. A grim little smile touched his lips as he squeezed the trigger. He knew what one of those 180-grain, metal-jacketed, boat-tail slugs could do at 2,700 feet per second. Probably at this close range it would keyhole and blow the foul thing into a mush, by God!

Wham! The familiar kick against his shoulder. E-e-e-e! The whining screech of a ricochet. He sucked in his breath. There could be no doubt whatever. At a mere twenty yards, a bullet from this hard-hitting rifle had glanced off the ruum's surface.

Frantically Jim worked the bolt. He blasted two more rounds, then realized the utter futility of such tactics. When the ruum was six feet away, he saw gleaming finger-hooks flick from warty knobs, and a hollow, sting-like probe, dripping greenish liquid, poised snakily between them.

The man turned and fled.

Jim Irwin weighed exactly 149 pounds.

It was easy enough to pull ahead. The ruum seemed incapable of increasing its speed. But Jim had no illusions on that score. The steady five-miles-an-hour pace was something no organism on earth could maintain for more than a few hours.

Before long, Jim guessed, the hunted animal had either turned on its implacable pursuer, or, in the case of more timid creatures, had run itself to exhaustion in a circle out of sheer panic. Only the winged were safe. But for anything on the ground the result was inevitable: another specimen for the awesome array. And for whom the whole collection? Why? Why?

Coolly, as he ran, Jim began to shed all surplus weight. He

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glanced at the reddening sun, wondering about the coming night. He hesitated over the rifle; it had proved useless against the ruum, but his military training impelled him to keep the weapon to the last. Still, every pound raised the odds against him in the gruelling race that he foresaw clearly.

Logic told him that military reasoning did not apply to a contest like this; there would be no disgrace in abandoning a worthless rifle. And when weight became really vital, the .30-06 would go. But meanwhile he slung it over one shoulder. The Geiger counter he placed as gently as possible on a flat rock, hardly breaking his stride.

One thing was damned certain. This would be no rabbit run, no blind, panicky flight until exhausted, ending in squealing submission. This would be a fighting retreat, and he'd use every trick of survival he'd learnt in his hazard-filled lifetime.

Taking deep, measured breaths, he loped along, watching with shrewd eyes for anything that might be used to his advantage in the weird contest. Luckily the valley was sparsely wooded; in brush or forest his speed on the straight would be almost useless.

Suddenly he came upon a sight that made him pause. It was a point where a huge boulder overhung the trail, and Jim saw possibilities in the situation. He grinned as he remembered a Malay mantrap that had once saved his life. Springing to a hillock, he looked back over the grassy plain. The afternoon sun cast long shadows, but it was easy enough to spot the pursuing ruum, still oozing along on Jim's trail. He watched the thing with painful anxiety. Everything hinged upon this brief survey.

He was right! Yes, although at most places the man's trail was neither the only route nor the best one, the ruum dogged the footsteps of his prey. The significance of that fact was immense, but Irwin had no more than twelve minutes to implement the knowledge.

Deliberately dragging his feet, Irwin made a clear trail directly under the boulder. After going past it for about ten yards, he walked backwards in his own prints just short of the overhang, and then jumped up clear of the track to a point behind the balanced rock.

Whipping out his heavy-duty belt-knife, he began to dig, scientifically but with furious haste, about the base of the boulder. Every few moments, sweating with apprehension and effort, he rammed it with one shoulder. At last, it teetered a little. He had just jammed the knife back into its sheath, and was crouching there, panting, when the ruum rolled into sight over a small ridge some way back along his trail.

He watched the grey spheroid moving towards him and fought

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to quiet his sobbing breath. There was no telling what other senses it might bring into play, even though the ruum seemed to prefer just to follow in his prints. But it certainly had a whole battery of instruments at its disposal. He crouched low behind the rock, every nerve a charged wire.

But there was no change of technique by the ruum; seemingly intent on the footprints of its prey, the strange sphere rippled along, passing directly under the great boulder. As it did so, Irwin gave a savage yell, and thrusting his whole muscular weight against the balanced mass, toppled it squarely on the ruum. A ton of stone fell from a height of twelve feet.

Jim scrambled down. He stood there, staring at the huge lump and shaking his head dazedly. He gave the boulder a kick. "Ha! Walt and I might clear a buck or two yet from your little meat market. Maybe this expedition won't be a total loss. Enjoy yourself in hell where you came from!"

Then he leapt back, his eyes wild. The giant rock was shifting! Slowly its mighty bulk was sliding off the trail, raising a ridge of soil as it grated along. Even as he stared, the boulder tilted, and a grey protuberance appeared under the nearest edge.

With a choked cry, Jim Irwin broke into a lurching run.

He ran a full mile down the trail. Then, finally, he stopped and looked back. He could just make out a dark dot moving away from the fallen rock. It progressed as slowly and as regularly and as inexorably as before, and in his direction. Jim sat down heavily, putting his head in his scratched, grimy hands.

But that despairing mood did not last. After all, he had gained a twenty-minute respite. Lying down, trying to relax as much as possible, he took the flat packet of emergency rations from his jacket, and eating quickly but without bolting, disposed of some pemmican, biscuit, and chocolate. A few sips of icy water from a streamlet, and he was almost ready to continue his fantastic struggle. But first he swallowed one of the three vitamin pills he carried for physical crises.

When the ruum was still an estimated ten minutes away, Jim Irwin trotted off, with much of his wiry strength back, and fresh courage to counter bone-deep weariness.

After running for fifteen minutes, he came to a sheer face of rock about thirty feet high. The terrain on either side was barely passable, consisting of choked gullies, spiky brush, and knife-edged rocks. If Jim could make the top of this little cliff, the ruum surely would have to make a detour, a circumstance that might put it many minutes behind him.

He looked up at the sun. Huge and crimson, it was almost touching the horizon. He would have to move fast. Irwin was no

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rock climber but he did know the fundamentals. Using every crevice, roughness, and minute ledge, he fought his way up the cliff. Somehow—unconsciously—he used that flowing climb of a natural mountaineer, which takes each foothold very briefly as an unstressed pivot-point in a series of rhythmic advances.

He had just reached the top when the ruum rolled up to the base of the cliff.

Jim knew very well that he ought to leave at once, taking advantage of the few precious remaining moments of daylight. Every second gained was of tremendous value; but curiosity and hope made him wait. He told himself that the instant his pursuer made a detour he would get out of there all the faster. Besides, the thing might even give up and he could sleep right here.

Sleep! His body lusted for it.

But the ruum would not detour. It hesitated only a few seconds at the foot of the barrier. Then a number of knobs opened to extrude metallic wands.

One of these, topped with lenses, waved in the air. Jim drew back too late—their uncanny gaze had found him as he lay on top of the cliff, peering down. He cursed his idiocy.

Immediately all the wands retracted, and from a different knob a slender rod, blood-red in the setting sun, began to shoot straight up to the man. As he watched, frozen in his place, its barbed tip gripped the cliff's edge almost under his nose.

Jim leapt to his feet. Already the rod was shortening as the ruum reabsorbed its shining length. And the leathery sphere was rising off the ground. Swearing loudly, Jim fixed his eyes on the tenacious hook, and drew back one heavy foot.

But experience restrained him. The mighty kick was never launched. He had seen too many rough-and-tumbles lost by an injudicious attempt at the boot. It wouldn't do at all to let any part of his body get within reach of the ruum's superb tools. Instead he seized a length of dry branch, and inserting one end under the metal hook, began to pry.

There was a sputtering flash, white and lacy, and even through the dry wood he felt the potent surge of power that splintered the end. He dropped the smouldering stick with a gasp of pain, and wringing his numb fingers, backed off several steps, full of helpless rage. For a moment he paused, half inclined to run again, but then his upper lip drew back, and snarling, he unslung his rifle. By heaven! he knew he had been right to lug the damned thing all this way—even if it had beat a tattoo on his ribs. Now he had the ruum right where he wanted it!

Kneeling to steady his aim in the failing light, Jim sighted at the hook and fired. There was a soggy thud as the ruum fell.

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Jim shouted. The heavy slug had done a lot more than he expected. Not only had it blasted the metal claw loose, but it had smashed a big gap in the cliff's edge. It would be pretty damned hard for the ruum to use that part of the rock again!

He looked down. Sure enough, the ruum was back at the bottom. Jim Irwin grinned. Every time the thing clamped a hook over the bluff, he'd blow that hook loose. There was plenty of ammunition in his pocket and, until the moon rose, bringing with it a good light for shooting, he'd stick the gun's muzzle inches away if necessary. Besides, the thing—whatever it might be—was obviously too intelligent to keep up a hopeless struggle. Sooner or later it would accept the detour. And then, maybe the night would help to hide his trail.

Then—he choked and, for a brief moment, tears came to his eyes. Down below, in the dimness, the squat, phlegmatic spheroid was extruding three hooked rods simultaneously in a fanlike spread. In a perfectly co-ordinated movement, the rods snagged the cliff's edge at intervals of about four feet.

Jim Irwin whipped the rifle to his shoulder. The first shot was a bull's-eye, smacking the left-hand hook loose in a puff of rock dust. His second shot did almost as well, knocking the gritty stuff loose so the centre barb slipped off. But even as he whirled to level at number three, Jim saw it was hopeless.

The first hook was back in place. No matter how well he shot, at least one rod would always be in position, pulling the ruum to the top.

Jim hung the useless rifle, muzzle down, from a stunted tree and ran into the deepening dark. The toughening of his body, a process of years, was paying off now. So what? Where was he going? What could he do now? Was there anything that could stop the damned thing behind him?

Then he remembered the dynamite.

Gradually changing his course, the weary man cut back towards his camp by the lake. Overhead the stars brightened, pointing the way. Jim lost all sense of time. He must have eaten as he wobbled along, for he wasn't hungry. Maybe he could eat at the lean-to . . . no, there wouldn't be time . . . take a vitamin pill. No, the pills were all gone and the moon was up and he could hear the ruum close behind. Close.

Quite often phosphorescent eyes peered at him from the undergrowth and once, just at dawn, a grizzly whoofed with displeasure at his passage.

Sometimes during the night, his wife, Cele, stood before him with outstretched arms. "Go away!" he rasped. "Go away! You can make it! It can't chase both of us!" So she turned and

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ran lightly alongside him. But when Irwin panted across a tiny glade, Cele faded away into the moonlight and he realized she hadn't been there at all.

Shortly after sunrise Jim Irwin reached the lake. The ruum was close enough for him to hear the dull sounds of its passage. Jim staggered, his eyes closed. He hit himself feebly on the nose, his eyes jerked open, and he saw the explosive. The sight of the greasy sticks of dynamite snapped Irwin wide awake.

He forced himself to calmness and carefully considered what to do. Fuse? No. It would be impossible to leave fused dynamite in the trail and time the detonation with the absolute precision he needed. Sweat poured down his body; his clothes were sodden with it. It was hard to think. The explosion *must* be set off from a distance and at the exact moment the ruum was passing over it. But Irwin dared not use a long fuse. The rate of burning was not constant enough. Couldn't calibrate it perfectly with the ruum's advance.

Jim Irwin's body sagged all over, his chin sank towards his heaving chest. He jerked his head up, stepped back—and saw the .22 pistol where he had left it in the lean-to.

His sunken eyes flashed.

Moving with frenetic haste, he took the half-filled case, piled all the remaining percussion caps among the loose sticks, in a devil's mixture. Weaving out to the trail, he carefully placed box and contents directly on his earlier tracks some twenty yards from a rocky ledge. It was a risk—the stuff might go any time—but that didn't matter. He would far rather be blown to rags than end up living but paralysed in the ruum's outdoor butcher's stall.

The exhausted Irwin had barely hunched down behind the thin ledge of rock before his inexorable pursuer appeared over a slight rise five hundred yards away. Jim scrunched deeper into the hollow, then saw a vertical gap, a narrow crack between rocks. That was it, he thought vaguely. He could sight through the gap at the dynamite and still be shielded from the blast. If it was a shield . . . when that half-case blew only twenty yards away . . .

He stretched out on his belly, watching the ruum roll forward. A hammer of exhaustion pounded his ballooning skull. Lord! When had he slept last? This was the first time he had lain down in hours. Hours? Ha, it was days. His muscles stiffened, locked into throbbing, burning knots. Then he felt the morning sun on his back, soothing, warming, easing . . .

No! If he let go, if he slept now, it was the ruum's macabre collection for Jim Irwin! Stiff fingers tightened around the pistol. He'd stay awake! If he lost—if the ruum survived the blast—there'd still be time to put a bullet through his brain.

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He looked down at the sleek pistol, then out at the innocent-seeming booby trap. If he timed this right—and he would—the ruum wouldn't survive. No. He relaxed a little, yielding just a bit to the gently insistent sun. A bird whistled softly somewhere above him and a fish splashed in the lake.

Suddenly he was wrenched to full awareness. Damn! Of all times for a grizzly to come snooping about! With the whole of Irwin's camp ready for greedy looting, a fool bear had to come sniffing around the dynamite! The furred monster smelt carefully at the box, nosed around, rumbled deep displeasure at the alien scent of man. Irwin held his breath. Just a touch would blow a cap. A single cap meant . . .

The grizzly lifted his head from the box and growled hoarsely. The box was ignored, the offensive odour of man was forgotten. Its feral little eyes focused on a plodding spheroid that was now only forty yards away. Jim Irwin snickered. Until he had met the ruum, the grizzly bear of the North American continent was the only thing in the world he had ever feared. And now—why the hell was he so calm about it?—the two terrors of his existence were meeting head-on and he was laughing.

He shook his head and the great side muscles in his neck hurt abominably. He looked down at his pistol, then out at the dynamite. *These* were the only real things in his world.

About six feet from the bear, the ruum paused. Still in the grip of that almost idiotic detachment, Jim Irwin found himself wondering again what it was, where it had come from. The grizzly rose on its haunches, the embodiment of utter ferocity. Terrible teeth flashed white against red lips. The businesslike ruum started to roll past. The bear closed in, roaring. It cuffed at the ruum. A mighty paw, armed with black claws sharper and stronger than scythes, made that cuff. It would have disembowelled a rhinoceros. Irwin cringed as that side-swipe knocked dust from the leathery sphere. The ruum was hurled back several inches. It paused, recovered, and with the same dreadful casualness it rippled on, making a wider circle, ignoring the bear.

But the lord of the woods wasn't settling for any draw. Moving with that incredible agility which has terrified Indians, Spanish, French, and Anglo-Americans since the first encounter of any of them with his species, the grizzly whirled, side-stepped beautifully, and hugged the ruum. The terrible, shaggy forearms tightened, the slavering jaws champed at the grey surface.

Irwin half rose. "Go it!" he croaked. Even as he cheered the clumsy emperor of the wild, Jim thought it was an insane tableau: the village idiot wrestling with a beach ball.

Then silver metal gleamed bright against grey. There was a

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flash, swift and deadly. The roar of the king abruptly became a whimper, a gurgle, and then there was nearly a ton of terror wallowing in death—its throat slashed open. Jim Irwin saw the bloody blade retract into the grey spheroid, leaving a bright red smear on the thing's dusty hide.

And the ruum rolled forward past the giant corpse, implacable, still intent on the man's spoor, his footprints, his pathway. O.K., baby, Jim giggled at the dead grizzly, this is for you, for Cele, for lots of poor dumb animals like us. Come to, you damned fool, he cursed at himself. And aimed at the dynamite.

And very calmly, very carefully, Jim Irwin squeezed the trigger of his pistol.

Briefly, sound first. Then giant hands lifted his body from where he lay, then let go. He came down hard, face in a patch of nettles, but he was sick, he didn't care. He remembered that the birds were quiet. Then there was a fluid thump as something massive struck the grass a few yards away. Then there was quiet.

Irwin lifted his head . . . all men do in such a case. His body still ached. He lifted sore shoulders and saw . . . an enormous, smoking crater in the earth. He also saw, a dozen paces away, grey-white because it was covered now with powdered rock, the ruum.

It was under a tall, handsome pine tree. Even as Jim watched, wondering if the ringing in his ears would ever stop, the ruum rolled towards him.

Irwin fumbled for his pistol. It was gone. It had dropped somewhere, out of reach. He wanted to pray then, but couldn't get properly started. Instead, he kept thinking, idiotically, "My sister Ethel can't spell Nebuchadnezzar and never could. My sister Ethel—"

The ruum was a foot away now, and Jim closed his eyes. He felt cool, metallic fingers touch, grip, lift. His unresisting body was raised several inches, and juggled oddly. Shuddering, he waited for the terrible syringe with its green liquid, seeing the yellow, shrunken face of a lizard with one eyelid a-tremble.

Then, dispassionately, without either roughness or solicitude, the ruum put him back on the ground. When he opened his eyes, some seconds later, the sphere was rolling away. Watching it go, he sobbed dryly.

It seemed a matter of moments only before he heard the seaplane's engine, and opened his eyes to see Walt Leonard bending over him.

Later, in the plane, five thousand feet above the valley, Walt

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grinned suddenly, slapped him on the back, and cried: "Jim, I can get a whirlybird, a four-figure job! Why, if we can snatch up just a few of those prehistoric lizards and things while the museum-keeper's away, it's like you said—the scientists will pay us plenty."

Jim's hollow eyes lit up. "That's the idea," he agreed. Then, bitterly: "I might just as well have stayed in bed. Evidently the damned thing didn't want me at all. Maybe it wanted to know what I paid for these trousers! Barely touched me, then let go. And how I ran!"

"Yeah," Walt said. "That was damned queer. And after that marathon. I admire your guts, boy."

He glanced sideways at Jim Irwin's haggard face.

"That night's run cost you plenty. I figure you lost more than 10 lbs."

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★ ★ ★

IRON RATIONS

I began to wonder whether we had overlooked anything else.

"By the way," I said, "you spoke about an ex-batman of the General's who knows his habits exactly. What does Monty eat?"

Nobody spoke. "What I mean is," I went on, "he may be a vegetarian or a food faddist, and it would never do to break his rules."

"H'm," said Colonel Lester. "What does he eat? Do any of you know?"

They all shook their heads.

"Very well, I'll have to see him at once and ask him."

That same evening, he went down to the South Coast and had a strange conversation with the General which went something like this.

Col. Lester: I'm sorry to trouble you, sir, but what do you eat?

Monty: What do you mean, what do I eat?

Col. Lester: When James impersonates you he'll have to eat just what you do. Are there any peculiarities in your diet?

Monty: Certainly not. I don't eat meat, I don't eat fish, and I take no milk or sugar with my porridge. That's all.

M. E. CLIFTON JAMES, *I Was Monty's Double*

★ ★ ★

When you have finished reading this copy of Argosy, why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

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THE WICKEDNESS OF MEN

Ah well, no woman is perfect . . .

by ROBERT FONTAINE

IT took me more than thirty years to understand the true wickedness of men. Women, I have learnt, are evil by nature; but men are evil deliberately and selfishly. Especially is this true of men in love.

Jacques Venoir is a superb example of my thesis. He told me a story one evening when he had drunk too much sherry—or so I believed then, for I thought I was too slight an acquaintance to deserve, without the sherry, such an intimate confession. Later, however, I concluded that remorse and a desire to brag had contributed heavily to his willingness to confide in me.

The scene of his disclosure was the Gold Pen Club, a small, quiet, well-managed private club which is in theory dedicated exclusively to soothing the mind of the tired author, but which has slowly, through economic necessity, come to admitting almost anyone who can spell.

I was slouched in a heavily padded chair, one which I have worn thin with my reclinings, when Jacques sat down a few feet away from me, facing me. At first I did not recognize him. He looked older than I had expected, for it was only a few short years since I had last seen him. At that time he had been trying desperately to gather enough money to produce a play which I thought would be better unproduced, an opinion in which the populace was to concur wholeheartedly when the drama was finally revealed to public ignominy.

Jacques had written the play himself. He was not a playwright, but he had gathered together all the theatrical clichés of the last half-century to make one huge and tiresome display. After this fiasco he had disappeared; some said to Trinidad with a beautiful married woman.

He spoke to me now, reminding me of common acquaintances and the fact that we had both written dramatic failures. I reminded him that I was somewhat ahead of him at present, having written two more since his disappearance.

He ordered several drinks, consumed them, spluttered on, his round face becoming red, his air becoming intimate.

I confess my mind was wandering. Through the years I have

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acquired the protective habit of listening with apparent polite interest while actually figuring my income tax or composing a brief letter to my wealthy maiden aunt.

Suddenly I was startled by a statement whose significance I could scarcely credit.

"I beg your pardon," I said. I had the feeling I had wandered into the latter half of a sentence fraught with bewilderment.

Jacques smiled oddly. "Aha, you see, I shock you! No? I mention Charles LaMarr and your eyes open. Yes, the great Charles LaMarr. To take something from such a man is to risk a bullet in the head, I am aware of that. I am no coward, no matter what you think. Aha, especially to take from him his prized possession, his jewel!"

I blinked. It was difficult for me to believe that my companion was speaking of LaMarr's beautiful wife. I had seen her once or twice when I had called, hat in hand, at the producer's office. She had brushed by us, all woman, sweet-scented, walking like a melody, throwing a generous glance of warmth over her shoulder, leaving a crumb of her fabulous beauty behind to nourish us.

I had met LaMarr once or twice, very casually. I did not care for him. He seemed arrogant and selfish. Curiously enough, I had an appointment to see him the following week, an appointment arranged through my agent in hopes that LaMarr would consider commissioning me to rewrite a French play he had bought. I had been in Paris for several years, and my agent considered my acquaintance with la place Pigalle and Ménilmontant sufficient recommendation.

"Pass judgment if you wish," Jacques was saying. "But confession is good for me. I do not know you well enough for your disdain to trouble me, and yet I do know you well enough to feel that you have the mind to understand my actions."

"I have," I said with a sigh, "great difficulty understanding my own."

Jacques went on. "Ah yes, one's own emotions are always a puzzle. The emotions of others we understand with a remarkable clarity and disapprove with a splendid vigour that we can never achieve when we consider our own."

He chuckled dryly, and was thoughtful awhile, smiling wanly. Then he continued. "It was at the time of my production, my unfortunate love-affair with the theatre. Laugh, if you wish. I can laugh now, also. But I loved the theatre even if the theatre refused my affection. I was a child of the streets, starved for good food and entertainment. Is it unnatural I was over-in-love with both when I became a man? Ah, you should have seen

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me, in rags, look through the brightly lighted windows of confectioners' stores, like the coloured illustrations one sees in magazines at Christmas-time, my nose pressed against the glass as if I could inhale through the cold hardness the warm and beautiful odours of the food. And you should have seen me in the topmost row of the gallery of a theatre, a theatre into which I had cunningly stolen entrance through cellars and cobwebby staircases. Yes, two things I dreamt of, good food and good theatre."

He stopped and stared at me intently as if to sense whether or not he had won my sympathy. I smiled indulgently. "But, Jacques, just the same, I understand you to say that you ran off with another man's wife."

He looked at me as if I were a child and he made a mocking, clicking sound with his mouth, as one makes to a child who is overwhelmed by some terrible, non-existent monster.

"I did not know that she was another man's wife."

I laughed. "Do not be ridiculous, Jacques."

For a moment, Jacques was angry. "When I met her, I did not know. Later, of course . . ." He stopped abruptly, his eyes aflame. "Very well. Why did he not treat her with charm and dignity so that she would not run away?"

I smiled sadly. "That is a point. Yes. No doubt."

Jacques ordered another sherry and continued. "You know, of course, how my only attempt at success in the theatre ended badly. I was at a low ebb. All the dreams, so carefully nourished through the cold years . . . they became mocking laughter in my ears. 'There goes Venoir, the rag-picker's son, the one who has put on airs. Aha!' I considered the river. One always does. It is convenient and romantic. Also cold and dirty. I considered other methods. Then, suddenly, as the first flaming flower of spring comes at the end of bitter winter, I found the woman who changed my entire life, raised me from the depths, set me in paradise."

He drank half his sherry and sighed. I spoke sharply.

"Charles LaMarr, of course, was ungracious and undignified enough to object."

"Object? By all means. That was his privilege. But why, when you look at it on all sides? Here is a man born with a golden ladle in his mouth; a man whose touch in the theatre spells success; a man with the finest home, wife, wine-cellar, and cook in the city. If he loved his fellow man would he begrudge me my little happiness—or, I should say, my little essay at happiness? I am a wicked man, I admit. But I have suffered for my evil. Ah, believe me, if I caused LaMarr a little inconvenience it was nothing to the disillusionment that came to me."

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"Ah well, no woman is perfect," I observed, dreaming of Madame LaMarr.

Venoir finished the last drops of his sherry. "I have work to do," he said quietly. "I am grateful to you for listening. Your attention has eased my conscience. I hope some day to tell you the details. You might use my story in a drama to point a highly moral lesson."

He looked at an inexpensive watch. "Ah, forgive me. I am late now."

I could not, of course, wait until chance sent Venoir to me again. At my appointment with LaMarr, all the while he was droning on, I nodded in agreement and did not listen, thinking of Venoir.

LaMarr, who is by no means stupid, stopped in the middle of his explanation of the subtleties of *Ma Foi*, a play that had run three years in Paris, and said, "Do you have any notion, mon ami, of what I am saying? Here is a great opportunity to connect yourself with a hit by the route of adaptation."

I smiled. "I know all about these adaptations, my friend. The play is a great success, the original author is loaded with garlands, and the adapter is almost forgotten in the fine print at the bottom of the programme. But the truth of the matter is, if you will forgive me, and since you asked, that I was thinking about Jacques Venoir. You know him, of course?"

LaMarr's face reddened. "The scoundrel!" he cried. "I should have beaten him soundly but I never could catch him. Ah, the dog!"

"He seems to think he was justified in . . . shall we say . . . being overcome by the charms of your wife."

LaMarr looked at me as if I were under a spell.

"Wife? Who speaks of wives? Were you led to believe my kitten of a wife was involved? Pooh! Venoir's crime was more heinous than that. It was my magnificent cook with whom Venoir ran away! My Berthe! She of the great muscles and yet the gentle way of a mother with a fillet or a cutlet. The man is a fiend!"

He poured himself and me a cordial of a greenish colour. After drinking it down, he went on.

"The story, however, ends with proper irony. Venoir married Berthe after her husband divorced her. Her husband was my butler, and a very inefficient one. He was eager to be rid of his wife, being enamoured of a girl named Blondina, a member of the chorus of *Les Folies*, I believe. But all Venoir's blandishments came to naught. He dreamt, I understand, of living each

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day with meals prepared and served for him by the best cook in the country. Ah, but Berthe was sick to death of cooking. She had spent her life among the scents of the kitchen. She longed to escape them and be a lady. The result? One can guess that she taught Venoir—perhaps, aha, at the point of a carving-knife—to cook. She told him her secret ways with sauces and garlic. So it was Venoir who spent the time cooking for Berthe."

He laughed good-naturedly. His rage ebbed through the telling as it had ebbed through the years.

"She became ill of a tropical fever and, perhaps, overeating, and passed away last year. And Venoir, dog that he is, let us give him justice. He is a pastry chef at the Flying Goat, the finest café in town, and he has more than enough of the finest foods to eat. And, for all I know, may yet write a successful play."

"If only about his own wickedness," I suggested.

"Ah," said LaMarr, "what audience would believe it possible?"

★ ★ ★

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Late one night, after we had all gone to bed, Debo woke Andrew and said she smelt something burning. They called me and I woke up to find the passage and staircase enveloped in yellow smoke. We ran downstairs into the drawing-room and saw that the curtains at one end of the room had small bright tongues of flame creeping up them. With difficulty we roused Billy, who was sleeping next door, and was already half suffocated, and together tried to deal with the fire.

Andrew rushed to one of our two telephones to summon the fire brigade, I rushed to the other; we both picked up the receivers at the same moment and found ourselves shouting at each other. I then took down a "Minimax" and banged its nozzle on the ground, but the jet was so fierce that I had no control over the heavy instrument and Andrew, trying to wrest it from me, was squirted in the face.

Billy went outside and broke the windows with a golf club, causing a draught which only fanned the flames, while Andrew crawled on his stomach underneath the smoke to try and rescue some of my gramophone records which had started to congeal together in the heat. He managed to retrieve only one—a tune called *I'm Playing with Fire*.

DAPHNE FIELDING, *Mercury Presides*

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MASQUE OF BEAUTY

There is many a fair thing found false

D. FERGUSSON, *Scottish Proverbs*

"I sit in a steam barrel," she said, looking fondly at Cedric, "for an hour or two, and then that nice Mr. Wixman comes down twice a week when we are at Hampton and he beats and beats me and the morning is gone in a flash. Cedric sees the cook for me nowadays, I find I can't take very much interest in food, in my barrel."

NANCY MITFORD, *Love in a Cold Climate*

Second Coat

To youths who hurry thus away,
How silly your desire is
At such an early hour to pay
Your compliments to Iris.

Stop, prithee, stop, ye hasty beaux,
No longer urge this race on;
Though Iris has put on her clothes,
She has not put her face on.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, *On a Painted Woman*

High Spirits

As I have said before, dressing in those days meant really hard work. My maid and the valet arrived early, so as to unpack and arrange everything. We came by a later train, to find the servants in a state of frenzy. "*Mais, Madame, c'est horrible, cet hôtel . . .* There is no lighting, only one candle! How can you dress here? I do not even know where to lay your gown. And how can I dress your hair?"

Anyhow, as there was nothing else to do, we started. I asked for six candles; the chambermaid said that she might get me one more, which she did. My poor husband was fuming next door. Then my maid discovered that she had forgotten the bottle of spirits of wine for the lamp to curl my hair.

She went down to the office but they said they had none.

Then I asked if they had brandy. They said yes. So brandy was brought, and the room stank of it, but we went on . . .

My husband called out that we ought to start and I was then only half curled. However, there was no time to curl the other

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side of my head. It took twenty minutes more to put on my dress. At last, not nearly ready, we started for our first Cannes dinner party. When we arrived at the Villa, I still felt only half dry.

Comtesse Torby came to greet me and said, "How nice you look." That night, several people came up to me and asked about my hair, praising its style.

BARONESS DE STOECKL, *My Dear Marquis*

Matchless Grace

Yet with us your toilet graces
Fail to please,
And the last of your last faces,
And your mise;
For we hold you just as real,
"Belle Marquise!"
. . . Just as near the old idea
Calm and ease,
As the Venus there, by Coustou,
That a fan would make quite flighty,
Is to her the gods were used to—
Is to grand Greek Aphrodite,
Sprung from seas.
You are just a porcelain trifle,
"Belle Marquise!"
Just a thing of puffs and patches,
Made for madrigals and catches,
Not for heart-wounds, but for scratches,
O Marquise!
Just a pinky porcelain trifle,
"Belle Marquise!"
Wrought in rarest rose-Dubarry,
Quick at verbal point and parry,
Clever doubtless—but to marry,
No, Marquise!

AUSTIN DOBSON, *Une Marquise*

Popping the Question

Wherefore, fair daughters, taketh example, and hold it in your heart that ye put no thing to pop, paint, and fair your visage . . . and that ye pluck no brows, neither temples, nor forehead; and also that ye wash not the hair of your head in none other thing but in lye and water.

The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry, 1371

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Scarlet Woman

" Those are the new ' Glow ' shades. Aren't they cute little bottles? But, good God Almighty, look at them names. Which do you want? Shell, pink or red, honey. Take red—go on, turn over a new leaf! Go on! " She held up the squat pinched bottle and the bright red through the pot-light seemed more alive than the hand that held it.

" I don't know. I can't take my eyes off my finger-nails if I have that."

" Well, you're going to have it, anyway. A little bright red won't do you any harm, honey. After all . . ."

" Sigsbie, you . . ." When Marty stopped, Sigsbie looked up, the red brush poised over the first finger-nail.

" What do you want, honey? "

" Nothing. You go on ahead."

After the ten red nails lay under the hot light, false as masks on the white fingers, Sigsbie leaned back for the last time. " Miz Dodd, they look gorgeous. Don't you move till they're good and dry or I won't let you have Sin-Glow any more." She crowed with laughter. " Lord, honey, you don't look a day over thirty, sitting there in your Sin-Glow—and here with a fine ready-made-grown-up boy! Lord's love, I think you're wonderful."

MARY LEE SETTLE, *The Love Eaters*

False Front

Sweet Cynthia, take the book away
For fear that what I find
Among the outer pages may
Destroy my peace of mind.

Can I continue to adore
Your guileless loveliness,
While fearing, when I know you more,
To find your beauties less . . .

Those eye-compelling curves to be
Contrived, synthetic things,
And all that fearful symmetry
Adjustable with strings? . . .

P. M. HUBBARD,
To Cynthia, not to let him read
the ladies' magazines

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I CAN'T CHANGE

Surprise is worth more than a gun

by EDWARD LINDALL

GRANGER had known for a long time that this was coming, but now it was happening, he felt numb and shocked. Jodi and he were shredding all the things that had existed between them—the small happinesses and the big ones, the bold plans. Everything was being torn up and trampled on, here in this little roadside café. A tawdry one-room place with blue-and-white checked tablecloths and a worn board floor. It was deserted in this drowsy mid-afternoon, except for the aproned counter-hand and a dark-suited man hunched over coffee and a newspaper, three tables away.

"It won't work," Jodi said tautly. "It just won't work."

"It's all in the way you look at it," Granger said slowly.

"I've looked all ways." She leaned forward, her small hands balled into fists on the crumb-specked tablecloth. "I can't change how I feel."

Granger couldn't stand the misery that swam in her grey eyes and drooped her mouth. She was a small, slim girl. She would have seemed fragile but for the firmness of her chin and the squared set of her shoulders. Her hair was dark and cut close to her head. She wore a white blouse, with a black bow tied loosely at the throat. She was so lovely that Granger feared he might weaken if he looked at her too long. His eyes dragged away and brooded on the empty tabletops.

"I can't change, either," he said. "I'm a cop. And I stay a cop."

"A cop," Jodi said bitterly. "That's it. A cop."

"And a good one," Granger said flatly. "Don't forget that." He had tried to make his voice mild but, somehow, hardness crept in. He could feel it riding along his jaw, tightening his mouth.

"You look like a real person now, out of uniform," Jodi said. "The way you *should* look. Always."

"I'll be wearing these clothes on duty one day," Granger said levelly, knowing it was no answer because nothing so easy could answer what was in her mind. "I'll make a plain-clothes squad. Soon now."

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She made a swift, impatient gesture. Her grey eyes flared. "It won't change anything," she said. "You'll still be dealing with traffic offences, and arresting down-and-outs for sleeping on park benches . . ."

Granger shrugged wearily. This was the old, bitter argument, the one that had fretted away their love; and he was powerless against it. They had come out this afternoon in a last, desperate effort to find an answer to their problem. And they had found nothing but their basic quarrel. To her, the police were small-time bullies who pushed other people around. Petty tyrants.

It didn't help Granger that he knew her story; it explained her deep contempt, but that was all. Way back, a much-loved uncle of hers had shot himself in a police-car rather than face a petty-theft charge. One of those silly, pathetic happenings. And she had grown up hearing about it, hearing her parents tell it until now, with them dead, she carried their bitterness like a banner.

Granger remembered how it had been when she had first seen him in police uniform—two days after he'd met her at a party where their eyes had spoken. The memory of her shocked anger goaded him now, and he couldn't stop the words that sprang from his lips, harsh, biting words.

"You think like a fool," he snapped. "And you talk like one."

She jerked upright as the words slapped her. A red flag of anger flew in each cheek. "Don't shout," she said coldly. "Let's keep it private."

Granger slanted a look at the other table. He could see the man only in quarter-profile, but there was a tenseness about him that told he had been listening. To hell with him, Granger thought, feeling swift annoyance. Then he realized they had raised their voices and the man wasn't to blame.

He lit a cigarette and jetted smoke sharply, almost explosively, from the corner of his mouth. He had a lean, high-boned face, and the doggedness that settled on it now made him appear much older than his thirty years. His brown eyes were hard with determination. "Look at it this way," he said, lowering his voice and spacing the words with enforced patience. "Just for argument's sake. Suppose the police are there to protect the weak, to protect them against the strong."

She examined herself in the wall mirror above his head, elaborately, exaggerating each movement to the point of insult. "They disguise it so well."

"Forget the failures for a while," Granger said tersely. "They aren't the whole force."

"Of course not," she drawled. "Let's remember only the goodies."

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" They're the ones that count—the only ones."

She stopped fussing with her hair then, and her hand sliced down like a sword. " But why? " she demanded. " Why d'you *have* to be a policeman? "

" Because I believe in it," he snapped back. Then he paused, gathering the frayed ends of his temper. When he went on, his words were measured carefully to give each one full emphasis. " Because I hate evil and want to help stamp it out."

He looked away from her again, dulled with the misery of this wrangling, frustrated by her inability to understand. His eyes rested again on the man at the other table, idly at first, half resenting his presence. Then they contracted to a pin-point sharpness as disquiet suddenly stirred within him. Something about the man rang false, something that made his covert listening seem more than mere curiosity.

From habit, Granger began checking off points. The man was too tense for a casual customer. His hands gripped the newspaper too tightly, buckling it. And he was too still—as though wanting to hide his face.

" That's fine," Jodi said bitterly. " Like most things, it sounds grand until you work it out."

" What d'you mean? " Granger asked the question automatically, almost without interest, because an instinct of danger was crowding everything from his mind. He memory-thumbed department files, searching the multi-face of thuggery for clues.

The man's face, what he could see of it, was dark, with a brutal jaw-line. Granger had the feeling that if he could see it full on, he would be able to put a name to it. He'd seen it before somewhere. He was sure of that, and the knowledge wasn't pleasant. All at once, he felt undressed without a gun.

" You're not fighting evil by being a cop," Jodi broke in. " Evil isn't little people breaking silly little laws."

Granger started slightly to hear her voice again. " We handle the big ones, too," he said.

" Sure," she mocked, " with kid gloves."

" Let's drop it," he said wearily. " You'll never understand."

" Let's drop everything," she said bleakly. " Neither of us will ever understand."

Granger gave her full attention then, his brown eyes darkening in eclipse. He reached across the table and covered her hand. She tried to pull it away, but he tightened his fingers and she had to leave it there. She looked him in the face for a moment, and behind the hurt, defiant surface he saw tears. Then she turned her head quickly, and he let her hand go because he knew there was no comfort for her in his touch.

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"Give it some more time," he said gently. "You're bitter now."

"I've reason to be bitter."

"I know," he said. "Your uncle. But you can't blame the police."

She didn't answer for a long while, and when she did, her voice was low, almost a whisper. Her eyes stared at the floor.

"I've tried to be rational—tried hard—but all the time, it's in the back of my mind, like a sickness. I remember how the shame crumpled my father, how he died hating the police." Her voice quickened. "Everything could've been righted so easily. A few hundred dollars was all that was needed to repay the sum stolen, but the police wouldn't wait. They had their duty and they wouldn't wait." She lifted her head, and her face was drawn and pale. "Can't you see it's impossible?"

"Impossible?"

"With that between us, we couldn't be happy."

Granger shook his head. "You're trying to be rational," he said quietly. "You don't allow for change, and that's important. One day you'll see it differently."

"It's no use," she said, her voice thin and dry. "I can't go on."

There was such finality in her voice that Granger felt numbness sink into his bones. This was the end. He was packed in ice. His mind was frozen, and it wasn't until the man at the table had looked quickly away that he realized he had been staring, for a split second, at the face of Happy Fragoni. Staring into the black, wet-shining eyes—malicious, baleful eyes that hadn't been able to resist the sound of misery.

A different chill gripped him then. The chill of instant danger, the quickening of the pulse, and that strange nervousness that keys a man for action. Happy Fragoni, murderer and hold-up man, whose brutal face figured on "wanted" notices throughout the country . . .

Instinctively, Granger's hand started to move towards his armpit, then stopped. There was no gun. His jaw tightened as a question loomed: had Fragoni seen recognition in his eyes—did he know he'd been spotted?

Granger looked around the café, searching for some sort of plan. There was nothing. The aproned counter-hand was staring, cow-eyed, out of the window, and Granger knew there would be no help from him. There were no other customers and none seemed likely at this hour. Cars snarled by on the highway, seeming to go faster as they passed, as though frightened by some scent of evil.

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"Who is he?" Jodi said quietly. The words sounded nonchalant, but when Granger looked he could see alarm in her grey eyes.

He felt swift annoyance that he should have allowed his face to give his thoughts away so clearly. He tried now to iron out all expression from it, but he knew it was too late. "Who?" he asked cautiously, playing for time.

"The man behind me. The one you've been watching." She gave him a tight little smile. "I can see him in the mirror."

"Happy Fragoni," Granger said. "The name wouldn't mean anything to you." He tried to make it sound casual, but he had to keep his voice to almost a whisper and it ruined the effect.

"It could mean a lot," she said. "The way you're looking."

Granger shrugged. "Just an old friend."

"That's why we're whispering of course," she said. "You're embarrassed."

"He stole a girl from me once," Granger said.

He knew she wouldn't believe that, but it didn't matter. She had to be told something while he worked out a plan. He had to take Fragoni. That much was simple. But it would mean shooting if anything went wrong. One-sided shooting. The man was a mad-dog killer, and if his gun came out it wouldn't blast just one victim. That it hadn't already cut loose left open two possibilities: either Fragoni hadn't guessed he'd been spotted and was waiting for them to go, or he knew and was working things out first.

Granger darted a glance at him. Fragoni was still glued to his newspaper. It looked even more phoney than before and Granger realized there was only one thing to do. Send Jodi out now, straight away, before he made a move. Maybe she would find a highway patrol somewhere, or she could phone Headquarters from a call box . . . He turned that over in his mind and it looked all right. It had to be. There was nothing else.

"You'd better tell me the truth," Jodi said, cutting into his thoughts. "You've had time to think it over."

"It's police work," Granger muttered. "You wouldn't be interested."

She picked up the cigarette-packet lying on the table, lit one, and ballooned smoke into the air. She rarely smoked, but now she made the motions expertly. And all the time she was looking at him, carefully and assessingly.

"There's no choice," she said deliberately. "For either of us there's no choice. I'm here, right in the middle of whatever it is."

For a moment Granger felt a fierce pleasure that she was sharing this swift-risen incident in his policeman's life. Even at this

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weighted moment her remembered gibing rankled. Fragoni was no down-and-out on a park bench. Perhaps this would teach her what he had tried, so hard and for so long, to convey . . . Then he suppressed the feeling with a deep sense of shame.

" Well," Jodi whispered, " tell me about Fragoni."

" It's not pretty," Granger said slowly. " He's a killer. The real thing, this boy."

Her breath caught sharply, and her eyes widened a fraction. But she didn't move her body and she didn't look up into the mirror. " Go on."

Granger nodded approvingly. " He's suspected of half a dozen killings at least," he said. "All over the country." He took a cigarette from the packet and lit it from the glowing end of Jodi's, leaning across the table so that their hands touched. " Two months ago he made his first mistake. Held up a filling station and shot the attendant. An old man, but a tough old man. He lived long enough to pick out Happy's photograph."

Jodi ground out her cigarette in the big glass ashtray in the centre of the table. She picked up some dry crumbs on her fingertips and dusted them into the tray, too. " What're you going to do? "

" Take him," Granger said simply.

" Without a gun? "

" Surprise is worth more than a gun," Granger said.

" And if it doesn't work? "

Anxiety put a raw edge on her voice and, hearing it, Granger felt a warm surge of pleasure. It was absurd and out of place, he knew. But the taste of their argument was still bitter in his mouth—" I can't go on," she had said—and he had thought those words meant she had forgotten how to care about him.

" I've allowed for it not working," he said. " I want you to go now. Find a call box and get help."

His eyes flicked at Fragoni, motionless as stone, then back to Jodi, and she was very still, too.

" Make sure the call box isn't too close. Our friend might get ideas when he sees you leave."

" I won't do it," Jodi whispered through stiff lips. " I won't run out and leave you to do this alone."

Granger grinned wryly. " Look," he said, " I'm not trying for medals. This is routine police work. Duty."

She gave him a long, searching look, as though trying to find some hidden quality that had to be explained—something she knew was there and yet needed further examination. " And you'd risk your life for it? "

He nodded. " I don't like killers."

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"Oh John." Her voice was hushed. Her hand gripped his, and for a moment panic was close to the surface.

"Time to go," Granger said softly. "Walk slowly. As though you don't give a damn for anything."

She picked up her bag, opened it, and dabbed powder on her nose. "How am I doing?"

"Fine," he said. "But keep talking. It looks better."

Her hand was steady as she ran a lipstick over her mouth. She dusted some cigarette-ash from her skirt, leaning forward, and Granger felt a breathless pain at the sheer beauty of the line of cheek and neck, the delicate straightness of her nose.

"Tell me one thing," she said. "Why do they call him Happy?"

"One of those pleasant jokes," Granger said, admiring her courage. "He whistles when someone's going to get hurt. That's how we got a line on him. The old man noticed it."

She shuddered. "How horrible."

"That's what makes me a cop," Granger said. "Men like Fragoni."

She flushed a deep red then, suddenly, as though flood-gates had been broken. She bit her lip and her eyes dropped. She fumbled her bag towards her. "Don't do anything silly," she said. "I'll try to be quick."

"Wait!" Granger hissed. "He's moving."

The cold urgency in his voice forced her back into her chair. His eyes had narrowed and his face was rock-hard. It seemed composed of separate planes, all of them meeting at sharp angles. He moved slightly, slid his right foot back alongside his chair, and leaned heavily on his forearms. In that position he was ready for instant action.

Jodi hadn't seen him like this before. There was relentlessness in his eyes and, behind that, another quality that thrilled her. As she recognized it, her fear of Fragoni ebbed away.

For there was something unconquerable about Granger now. And in a quick, vivid burst of insight she discerned the trim, stern outlines of a uniform behind the loose sports coat he was wearing.

"Does he suspect?" she whispered.

"Don't know," Granger said tersely. "But he must know I'm a cop. He's overheard that much."

He leaned across the table, facing her square on, but tracking Fragoni from the corners of his eyes. He talked fast and low: "You'll stay here now. I'll follow him and try to tackle him outside. If there's shooting, beat it—out through the kitchen—any way, but get out fast."

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" There must be something I can do—"

" Talk," Granger said quickly. " About anything." His neck muscles corded. " Don't look. He's coming now. Talk—argue with me—loudly."

" Insult me, that's right," Jodi stammered. " Call me names."

" You asked for it," Granger retorted, raising his voice. " What did you expect? Orchids? "

He could hear the heavy shuffle of Fragoni's footsteps and knew that he had to turn his head. Idly, the way one customer would glance up to see another leave. He forced an expression of unconcern and looked round. It froze on his face. His body snapped taut as a spring.

" Don't move, copper," Fragoni snarled, " or the girl gets it."

A black pistol was an obscene growth in his right hand. It was trained on Jodi.

Granger cursed, silently and bitterly, as he realized that he must have given himself away when their eyes had met. Or immediately after, when the full impact of the meeting had struck him.

Fragoni was bigger than he had thought. Not tall, but wide and thick through the chest. He had a heavy jaw, a swarthy skin with big, ugly pores. His eyes were dull black and moist-looking —killer's eyes. He was whistling softly through his teeth. No tune. Just a grey-note monotony. Granger felt his skin crawl.

" Don't be a fool," he said, trying to play innocent. " We're not hurting you."

Fragoni didn't answer. He snaked his eyes at the counter-hand and gave the revolver a flick. " You," he grated. " Over here."

The man came out sideways, wiping his hands on his coffee-and-soup-stained apron. The Adam's apple of his thin neck bobbed like a fisherman's float. His legs were so stiff with fear that he might have been moving on stilts.

Granger took a quick glance at Jodi. She was pale and tense. A pulse beat violently at the base of her soft neck and, somehow, the sight of it angered him more than anything. He felt rage inside him, but knew he had to keep it from bursting out.

Rage was no good against a gun. Their only chance now was to out-think Fragoni, and he tried, frenziedly, to fashion some plan. Anything.

" On yer feet," Fragoni growled. He jerked the gun sideways, viciously. " You first, copper. Then the girl."

" Where are we going? "

" Outside." Fragoni grinned, a wide, open-mouthed grin that showed a row of discoloured teeth. " See if you've got any friends around."

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Granger sat watching him, holding himself at hair-trigger tension, waiting for the chance he feared would never come. Killers like Fragoni didn't give chances. But you never knew, he thought. You never knew.

Maybe a car would stop, he thought—or, better still, a truck. Then he shook his head. Either of those would only mean a few more unarmed people in the café, and Fragoni would do his slaughter and hold them horror-struck while he got away.

"On yer feet," Fragoni said again, the words hissing. "Fast!"

Granger got up slowly, his mind, like a terrier, worrying its problem. He had to think of something—and quickly. Once they got outside, they wouldn't live longer than it took Fragoni to see there was nothing to stop his get-away. Granger got a sick, empty feeling in the stomach as he thought of that. Not for himself, but for Jodi.

Then his mind sniffed at something, grappled with it, and saw it was a chance. Slim, threadbare, but a chance. Fragoni couldn't know for certain that he'd been identified. Not for certain. So perhaps a bluff might work; might sow enough doubt to throw him out of his stride.

"You're making a big mistake, Williams," Granger said quietly. "I've got nothing on you."

"Williams?" Fragoni's black eyes squinted with suspicion. His thick forehead wrinkled.

"Don't kid me," Granger said. "You're Ike Williams. I'd know you anywhere."

"Yeah?" Fragoni drew the word across his tongue, as though tasting it for poison.

"You've thrown a gun on me, Ike," Granger said, forcing himself to be calm as he saw Fragoni falter. "Beat it now and I'll forget it. I'm here with my girl." He flicked his head at Jodi, twisting his lips into a wise smile. "You know how it is."

Fragoni looked worried, undecided. He pursed his lips as if to whistle, but changed his mind, and licked them instead. He had a big, heavy tongue like a lizard's. Then he stiffened and wild hatred flared in his eyes, as though whipped up by some dreadful self-respect. "All I know is you're a cop," he snarled. "I ain't takin' any chances."

"Well, let's go," Granger said, sick with disappointment to see his plan fold up.

He moved round the table on a line that would take him behind Fragoni, knowing it was so obvious that it wouldn't work, but playing for every second because time was the only thing that could save them now. Time to do something, time for something to happen.

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" Get back," Fragoni grunted, stabbing the gun at his stomach. " Round t'other way."

Granger stopped inches from the gun, but he didn't look at it. He kept his eyes boring into Fragoni's and it was like looking into two wet, polished stones. There was nothing in them. Then Fragoni began to whistle softly, staring back, and Granger knew he had to burst into action soon. He had to close with this mad killing-machine because the death sentence had been passed and Fragoni was now savouring the preliminaries.

" Ike," he said softly, keeping obstinately to his bluff, " I'm going to beat hell out of you for this."

" Any time, copper, any time."

The gun-barrel tilted upwards and Fragoni's black eyes gleamed with an evil joy. Granger tensed himself, deciding this was the time. With the gun higher there was a chance to throw himself backwards, hook a foot behind Fragoni's legs, and pull him down. That way there was a hope of the bullets missing—only a slender hope, but it was better than nothing. He held his breath, coiled himself . . .

And then Fragoni moved back quickly. Only one step, but enough to make the plan unworkable. Enough to have trapped him. Fragoni sneered, and Granger realized then that he had been led on to create an additional macabre thrill for the killer. Anger rose in him like a red mist, a choking, all-consuming anger. His fists bunched . . .

Then he heard Jodi call out. High and harsh. Almost a screech.

" Fragoni! " she screamed. " Fragoni! Fragoni! "

The call was so shattering in that tightrope tension that, for a moment, Fragoni forgot his caution. He turned his head and the gun moved with it. Granger lunged forward, left hand flashing downwards. It closed round Fragoni's thick, sinewy wrist as the gun roared, and the hot blast was so close he didn't know whether he had been hit or not.

He brought his right knee up hard, and saw Fragoni double over, gasping with pain. His right fist came up and round in a vicious arc and landed flush against the stubble jaw. He whipped in the left; then the right again. Fragoni's eyes popped and his mouth slopped open. He stood for a moment, swaying on his feet, then slid to the floor.

Granger stamped on the gun as it slithered across the boards, bent quickly, and scooped it up. Then he turned, looking for Jodi, and she was coming straight for him. Her arms went round him, clutching as though they would never let go. Her head nestled on his chest.

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"Oh John . . . John!" Her voice was choked. "Darling. You're all right?"

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I'm all right." He held her tightly and looked over her head to the counter-hand, standing scared, like an animal in a trap, wanting to run but held to the spot. "Get on that phone," he said. "Call Headquarters . . . the police."

"Yessir." The man backed away, his eyes goggling at the slumped, lumpish figure on the floor.

"You can turn round," Granger said, grinning. "He won't bite any more." Then the grin faded as he felt Jodi droop in his arms. He looked down anxiously, and she gave him a faint, wobbly smile.

"It's nothing," she said weakly. "I'm not going to be silly."

Granger bent and kissed her on the lips. "You be anything you like," he said quietly. "You've earned the right."

"I'd like to be a cop's wife, then," she said softly.

"A cop's wife?" Granger echoed wonderingly, struggling against his belief. "I don't understand . . ."

"You'll get used to it in time," she said, smiling up at him. "It took *me* a long while to understand, too."

* * *

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 22

Argosy's twenty-second Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first five correct solutions checked on the closing date. If you do not wish to cut Argosy, copy your solution on to a plain sheet of paper, adding your name and address in capital letters. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to: ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 22), 3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4. (Comp), to arrive by Wednesday, March 9th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale May 10th.

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 19

For the names of prize-winners and the solution of Argosy Prize Crossword No. 19, please see page 143.

In next month's ARGOSY
HENRY CECIL—EDMUND GILLIGAN
LORD DUNSANY—BRYAN MACMAHON

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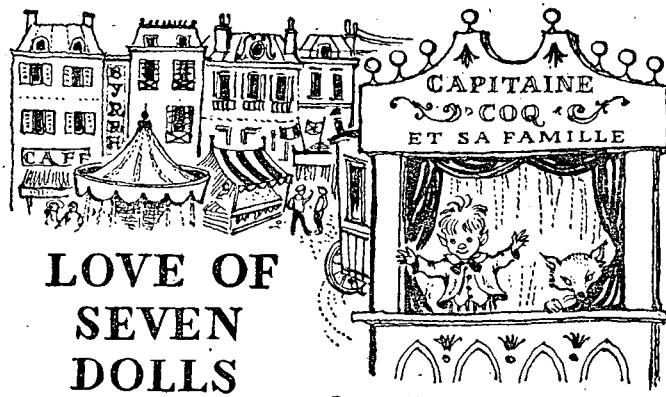

LOVE OF SEVEN DOLLS

by Paul Gallico

MOVING south, Capitaine Coq and his puppets remained for ten days in Lyons for the big October Fair, pressed on to Marseilles and Toulon, then ventured to rim the Côte d'Azur, the strip along the Mediterranean devoted to the wealthy, and in Nice joined up with a large circus playing in a vacant lot not far from the seashore.

The morning of the final day of the circus, which was then going on to Monte Carlo, a fat, untidy-looking old gentleman with a veined nose, the calculating eyes of a pig, wearing a bowler hat and carrying a gold-headed cane, bustled up to Golo, the one-eyed Senegalese sergeant, and demanded to see Capitaine Coq.

The puppet family was having its breakfast get-together meeting before the day's performances began, a kind of warm-up during which plans for the day were discussed. The old gentleman was immediately greeted by Carrot Top, the leprechaun puppet, whose shrill, "Did you have an appointment?" was followed by Reynardo's yapping laugh. "First he's got to have an appointment to make an appointment. That's my department. Who did you say you thought you were?" the Fox asked.

Mouche apologized for them politely: "They're being very naughty today. You must forgive them. Perhaps I can help you."

It then turned out that he was an agent named Bosquet who booked acts for the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Nice, and he wished to negotiate for the troupe to appear as one of the turns in the show.

The news threw the entire collection of puppets into a frenzy of excitement, joy, worry, advice and counter advice, plans, and questions, with Mr. Reynardo yapping hysterically and thumping back and forth across the counter of their travelling booth, shouting, "I'm going to be an actor. At last my true worth has been recognized. Ha, ha, it was me gave you the idea, wasn't it, old boy? Mouche, did you hear? We're all going on the stage."

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As the curtain rises on this last excerpt, fame and success, a handsome young husband and a new, happy life are beckoning to Mouche, the French waif—if she will leave her seven little friends, Capitaine Coq's puppets. Out of this poignant conflict, with his customary deft touch, Paul Gallico brings about yet another small miracle before ringing down the final curtain.

★

It was a somewhat harrowing experience for Monsieur Bosquet, who was made to show his credentials by Dr. Duclos, the Penguin puppet, and submit to an interrogation on the moral state of the theatre conducted by the worldly-wise concierge, Madame Muscat, and then deal with Monsieur Nicholas, the toy-mender, and Carrot Top, so that in the end he became confused into paying more for the act than he had intended. He never did get to see Capitaine Coq, for when the contract was completed, Carrot Top took it below and returned with the document signed.

The three weeks they took to prepare their act for the variety stage were not happy ones for Mouche, for while the rehearsals were as usual conducted by Carrot Top and Dr. Duclos, the sudden rise in the fortunes of the troupe seemed to have made Capitaine Coq even more bitter and violent. Aware that their engagement was due only to the catalytic presence of Mouche, he felt compelled to resent more than ever the fact that he owed to her an affluence and position he had never known before.

He criticized her walk, her clothes, her voice. It seemed as though he was almost determined to make their début on the stage a failure. But, if so, he was doomed to disappointment and had forgotten the strange, independent will of the seven dolls and the electric relationship that existed between them and the girl.

The first performance on any stage of Capitaine Coq and his family opened riotously on a Saturday evening to a packed house. With the first appearance of Mouche, the puppets individually and collectively threw away the script, so to speak, and for twenty minutes furnished the audience with entertainment that veered from the hilarious, when Mr. Reynardo attempted to make himself up as Cyrano, to the touching, when Alifanfaron the Giant suffered an attack of stage fright.

They were presented against a set of a village square, with Golo strumming his guitar to attract a crowd, but with the first appearance of Carrot Top and his excitement and delight at discovering the audience and his shrill shouts for Mouche to come and see, all pretence of giving an orderly show was abandoned, and everyone, including Mouche, did exactly as they pleased.

Coq had originally provided a vulgar costume for Mouche. She came on instead in a simple skirt and peasant blouse, as natural as she was, her short-cut black hair and huge eyes shining in the spotlights that picked out the booth.

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The puppets illuminated the theatre with their excitement at being on a stage. They brought on embarrassed stage-hands and electricians whom Mouche at once put at ease; they attempted horribly garbled snatches from the French classics; they made Mouche describe the members of the orchestra whom they could not see; they demanded different coloured spotlights—they upset all tradition in a dozen different ways.

And as usual, Mouche forgot where and even who she was, and became the innocent and marvelling playmate of the seven, and so carried them all straight to the hearts of the audience.

But while laughter ruled, the highlight was touched perhaps when Alifanfaron, at the first sight of the large audience, froze into such a ludicrous and stammering attack of stage fright that not even Mouche could coax him out of it!

Golo strolled on from the wings, plucking at his guitar. He chuckled and said in his soft, rich African French, " Sometimes when you scared, it helps if you sing your scare away." His fingers created the notes he had once played for Mouche on a certain night long ago in far-off Besançon.

The girl picked up the thread at once. She went to the big, stupid Giant, trembling and cowering in the booth, put her arm about him, and rocking him gently, sang a Breton lullaby with Golo. Carrot Top came up and joined in the chorus, and at the end the Giant lifted his shaggy head, gazed out to all quarters of the audience, and announced ineffably, " I'm not scared any more."

Carrot Top bounced over and patted Golo's cheek and kissed Mouche. The house was as hushed as though it had been a church. Many in the audience were crying.

The next moment, Mouche was romping through her own version of *Va-t'en*, with Reynardo, and Gigi, the golden-haired girl puppet, playing the eternal soubrette, and later with Madame Muscat and Dr. Duclos.

In the wings, during the performance, there stood a young man in blue tights with gold spangles and an overcoat thrown over his shoulders. Never once did he take his large, moist, handsome brown eyes from the face and figure of the girl by the puppet booth.

His name was Balotte, and he was an acrobat, a member of a troupe waiting to go onto the high trapeze in the turn that followed the puppet number. Other artistes were likewise gathered there to watch the new act and found themselves as captivated as the audience.

But Balotte, who was a good, simple boy, of somewhat limited intelligence and overweening vanity, was for the first time in his life falling in love with someone other than himself.

Looking out onto the stage at this gentle, gay, sincere, and motherly girl, he felt his heart touched as it had never been before. Yet at the same time he was filled with a professional's excitement at the show she was giving, for he appreciated what a girl who could make an audience sit up and take notice like that could do for him. He had long had it in his mind to go as a single act and

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had been looking for a girl partner to throw him the handkerchief and stand about while he performed his feats.

The act came to a close to ear-shattering applause. Wave after wave of it poured over Mouche. She brought on each of the puppets for a bow. When the curtain closed upon her for the last time, she was standing with her back to the booth. Carrot Top, an arm about her neck, had his cheek pressed against one of hers, with Mr. Reynardo against the other. Her eyes were shining. She had never been so happy.

When she came off, Balotte went to her and said, " Holà, little one. That was not bad, and I have seen many acts. Now stay here and watch me. Afterwards I shall have something to say to you."

And so, out of politeness, Mouche remained in the wings and looked upwards at the handsome boy as he swung, leapt, whirled, and somersaulted with his partners, and occasionally threw her a look as he sat resting on the trapeze high up in the flies, or brushing his moustache self-consciously.

Capitaine Coq came by, clad in black corduroy trousers and a black, high-necked sweater emphasizing his pallor, his fox-coloured hair, and the cold glitter of his eyes. It was a commentary on his art that, except for the stage manager, hardly anyone knew who he was. He paused for a moment and followed Mouche's glance upwards.

" Kinkers," he sneered, using the showman's derogatory term for acrobats, and spat. Then, without another glance at Mouche, he went off. He had made a date with a girl in the orchestra who played the flute.

But Balotte, when he came sliding down the rope, was pleased, though not surprised, that Mouche had remained there watching him, and said, " Well? Was that all right, little one? "

Mouche replied sincerely, " Oh yes, indeed. I thought you were wonderful."

" Oh, that wasn't anything. Wait until you see the new routine I am working up. Something really sensational."

" But isn't it fearfully dangerous," Mouche asked, " without a net or anything? "

Balotte preened himself. " But of course. That is what the public likes. Look here, what about coming out with me for something to eat and a glass of beer? "

He was amazed at the expression of panic that crossed her face. " I—I don't know whether I can. I've never been before . . ."

Balotte came quickly to the point. " Is he your husband, that one? The fellow who calls himself Capitaine Coq? " he asked.

Mouche shook her head quickly. " Oh no. He is not."

Balotte was intelligent enough not to inquire any further. " Well, then, put on your street clothes and I'll meet you inside the stage door as soon as I have changed."

It was several minutes before Mouche could bring herself to

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believe that she was free to accept such an invitation. The bondage in which Capitaine Coq held her had become almost a habit, but even more, she belonged to the seven dolls and felt as though she ought to have asked Carrot Top for permission.

She hurried then to keep the rendezvous, but found herself wishing she might have discussed with Madame Muscat the propriety of going out for the evening with a young man who had only just introduced himself to her.

Balotte arrived shortly, hair sleeked down, the inevitable acrobat's white silk scarf round his neck, and smelling faintly of perspiration mingled with liniment.

He was delighted by his success and flashed magnificent white teeth at her. Also, he took her most solicitously by the arm to guide her as though she were fragile. It had been so long since a man had been gentle with her that it quite warmed Mouche's heart. All of a sudden she remembered that she was a young girl, and laughed happily, and leaning on the sturdy arm of the young man, asked, " Where shall we go? "

They went to a water-front café at the far end of the quai du Midi. There, sitting out under the stars, they supped on highly seasoned bouillabaisse which called for quantities of beer, which in turn made them light-headed and merry.

They danced together, and contact with this strange girl made Balotte quite ardent and he held her close, yet tenderly. The tenderness found an answering response in Mouche. Youth was wooing youth.

At the performance the next day, Dr. Duclos, of all people, came up with a present for Mouche. It appeared he had been shopping and, passing a perfume counter, had so far abandoned caution as to invest in a small *flacon*. Oddly, it was the first perfume Mouche had ever had.

They made her open it and try it. Gigi jealously sampled some, Madame Muscat sniffed disdainfully, Ali tried to drink it because, if it smelt so good, it must taste even better. For twenty minutes they elaborated this slender theme to the enchantment of the audience, and ended with Mr. Reynardo in Mouche's arms, quite overcome and swooning.

As Mouche came offstage, Balotte, waiting to go on, whispered, " Tonight again? "

Mouche looked about her in alarm. " I don't dare. He has threatened to do you an injury."

Balotte snorted, " Ho! I can take care of myself. I know of a place where the music is even better. Be at the stage door again at the same time, little one, eh? "

Mouche replied, " I don't know."

But she was there, hoping that Coq would not be about. She longed so for the gaiety and the sweet ease of being with someone who was kind. She did not have to wait. Balotte was there. And Capitaine Coq stepped out of a shadowed corner.

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Capitaine Coq said, " Well, I can see that you are both asking for it. Have it, then! " He whipped the backs of five bony fingers across Mouche's face, knocking her against the wall. " Gutter slut! " he bawled at her.

Balotte made a menacing movement. Coq turned on him, " As for you, you muscle-bound idiot, you can hang by your tail like a monkey, but you wouldn't lift a finger for her or anybody else. I'm going to teach you to keep away from her."

But Capitaine Coq was wrong. Balotte was no coward, and furthermore, he had a body like iron, wrists of steel, and more than a little knowledge of the science of attack and defence.

The fight was short and savage, both men moiling, writhing, and striking in silence, with no sound but the whistling of their breath, the thud of blows, and the grunts of pain. Then it was over, with Capitaine Coq lying in a battered, bloodied heap upon the floor, stunned, whipped, and unable to rise.

Mouche stood by the wall, her hand to her own bruised lips, staring down at him. So had she prayed to see him, beaten, cowed, mastered. Yet she was conscious only of being filled with sadness and of an ache in her throat, comparable to those experienced sometimes before the puppet booth when one or other of its inhabitants was particularly moving. She had not known that a wish fulfilled could be so empty, and that the physical destruction of the object of her hatred would yield no more than the desire to weep for the downfall of evil.

Balotte said, " Come along, then, Mouche. This fellow won't give you any more trouble."

Capitaine Coq received the news of Mouche's forthcoming marriage and departure from the show with surprising calmness. Perhaps he had been expecting it. They went to him together, for Mouche had not the courage to face him alone. She declared her intention of remaining with the show until the end of the month, when the contract expired. Then she and Balotte would be married and she would leave.

He had listened to her with a curious expression on his cynical countenance and then had simply shrugged and turned away, vanishing in the direction of his dressing-room, which was on the other side of the stage from that occupied by Mouche. And for the remainder of the engagement she never saw him again.

But if Coq appeared to accept, with a certain amount of resignation, Mouche's decision to marry Balotte and leave the act, the seven little creatures whom Mouche met twice daily, in the pool of spotlights focused on the shabby little puppet booth onstage, took the event over, discussed it, and harped on it endlessly.

Each reacted to Mouche's romance and engagement according to his or her nature, and Madame Muscat's attempts to ascertain whether Mouche knew the facts of life and her advice to her for her wedding-night provided one of the most hilarious evenings the old theatre had ever known.

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Yet, to anyone witnessing one or more of these performances, it became evident that, for all the childish interest and seemingly light-hearted banter, the allusions to Mouche's approaching marriage and departure were filled with the tragic implications of children about to lose the security of the presence of one who was both loved and loving.

Through every show, there ran a vein of dread of the day, a forlornness, a helplessness, and a dumb pleading that wrung Mouche's heart, for with her departure becoming imminent, she herself did not know how she would be able to leave these little people who in the past year had become such a part of her—the only real friends, companions, and playmates she had ever known.

The pressure upon Mouche was becoming intolerable, and she did not know how she would be able to reach the final night without breaking, for Balotte could not help her. He was pleased with the publicity that had come his way and the applause that greeted his appearances now that he was the bridegroom-to-be of a romantic story that had been written up in the newspapers. He had no idea of what was happening to Mouche.

The final performance of Capitaine Coq and his family, which took place in the Théâtre du Vaudeville on the Saturday night of December 15th, was one that Mouche would not forget as long as she lived.

The old theatre, with its red velvet drapes, gold-encrusted boxes, and shimmering candelabra, had been sold out for more than a week. Word had spread along the Côte d'Azur, and there were visitors from Cannes, Saint Tropez, Antibes, and Monaco. Half of the audience present were regulars who, over the weeks, had fallen in love with Mouche, or the seven dolls, and had paid premiums to be there. The front rows sparkled with jewels, gleaming décolletage, and white shirt-fronts.

The performance began as usual with the strains of *Va-t'en, va-t'en*, and the curtain rising to show a corner of the village square with the puppet booth set up, and Golo in front of it, the white patch gleaming over his vacant eye-socket, strumming on his guitar a little song calling the village folk together to see their show.

The spotlight on Golo would dim; the pools of light by the booth would narrow. One of the puppets would appear with startling suddenness in the limelight and claim the attention of all. Mouche was never onstage as the curtain went up.

This night it began with Mr. Reynardo making a furtive appearance on the counter of the booth, looking carefully to the right and left and behind him as well. Then he called: "Psssst! Golo!" And when Golo appeared from behind the booth, "Where's Mouche?"

"I don't know, Mr. Reynardo. You want me to call her?"

"In a minute. I've got something for her." He ducked down and appeared with a handsome red-fox fur, tipped with a bushy tail at one end and a small fox mask at the other. He stretched it

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along the counter and for a moment snuffled up and down its length. " It's for her," he told Golo.

" Dieu," remarked Golo, " but that's rich. I'll go fetch Mouche, Mr. Reynardo."

While Golo went off into the wings, Mr. Reynardo scrutinized the scarf closely. " Eeeeeh! " he said with some slight distaste. " Awfully familiar. Say, she was a nice-looking babe . . . I seem to remember her from somewhere." He moved up to the head of the scarf and bestowed a surprisingly gentle kiss on the muzzle. " Requiescat in pace, kid," he said. " And keep Mouche warm."

Mouche walked onstage into a storm of applause that lasted for several minutes and brought the ache back to her throat. Whenever she was shown kindness or approval, it brought her close to tears.

At last she was able to proceed. She began, " Golo said you were looking for me, Rey."

" Uhuh. Glad you got here before the others. Er . . . ah . . ." The Fox was looking not entirely comfortable. He reached forward, and taking the scarf, he held it out to the girl.

" This is for you. It's a wed—" he seemed to gag over the word and switched to—" a going-away present for you."

Mouche's hand flew to her heart. " Oh Rey, how beautiful! Oh, you shouldn't have . . . You know you shouldn't have spent so much . . ."

Her expression altered suddenly to the wise, tender, and slightly admonishing " Mother-knows-all-what-have-you-done-now " look that her audiences knew so well. " Rey! Come over here at once and tell me where you got that beautiful and expensive fur."

The Fox squirmed slightly. " Must I, Mouche? "

" Reynardo! You know what I have always told you about being honest."

By a twist of his neck, Mr. Reynardo managed to achieve a look of injured innocence. " Well, if you must know, I bought it on the hire-purchase plan."

" Indeed. And what happens if you fail to keep up the payments? Oh Rey! I suppose they'll come to my home and take it away from me."

The Fox slowly shook his head. " Oh no. You see, I made a kind of a deal."

Mouche was mock-serious now and once more lost in their make-believe. She knew the kind of sharp practice to which he was prone. She asked, "And pray, what kind of a deal, Mr. Reynardo?"

" We-e-ell . . . if I fail to keep up the instalments, the man gets something else in exchange. I signed a paper. It's all settled."

Mouche walked right into the trap. " Did you? And just what is he to have in exchange for this exquisite fur piece? "

The Fox appeared to swallow once, then modestly turned his head aside before he replied meekly, " Me."

Struck to the heart, Mouche cried, " Oh my dear! You mean you've pawned yourself? Oh Rey, I don't know what to say . . ."

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For a moment Mouche glanced out across the footlights, and the balcony spot picked up two drops of light traversing her cheeks and splintered them so that they glowed like diamonds.

In a flash, the Fox was across the stage of the booth and whipped his red, furry head with the black mask and long nose into the hollow of Mouche's shoulder and snuggled there with a contented sigh, like a naughty child that takes immediate advantage of any tenderness.

The contact came close to breaking Mouche's heart for love of this sly, wicked little creature, whose mischief and amorality stemmed from the fact that it was his nature and he did not know any better. Yet he tried hard to please her and be honest for her sake.

Thereafter, the other puppets appeared, to delight and torture Mouche still further with their parting gifts and little made-up, awkwardly sincere speeches.

Dr. Duclos presented her with an encyclopaedia. " Everything I know is inside this book," the formally dressed Penguin pontificated. " Thought you might like to have it handy for information on all subjects when I am not around any longer."

Gigi gave her a trousseau négligé-and-nightgown set and a grudging kiss, while Madame Muscat handed her a rolling-pin and an egg-beater, remarking significantly, " A marriage can be kept in order with these, my dear. And remember, all men are beasts, but necessary ones." From Alifanfaron she received a photograph of himself, and Monsieur Nicholas gave her an oddly turned piece of wood that was not one but many shapes.

" For your first-born," he said. " It is a toy I have made for him that is not any, yet is all toys, for in his imagination, when he plays with it, it will be whatever he sees in it or wishes it to be."

Golo came forward. He had a little African good-luck god he had carved for her out of a piece of ebony wood. Like the white-shafted spotlights that beamed down from above, the emotions and tensions of everyone in the theatre seemed concentrated on this one spot, the shabby little booth, the negro with the gleaming patch over one eye who was crying unashamedly, and the girl who was trying desperately to hold herself together.

From where she was standing, Mouche could look into the wings and see the showgirls, singers, dancers, acrobats, and stage-hands gathered there, watching and listening, as spellbound as the audience. She saw Balotte in his blue spangled tights, his beautiful body proud and erect, and he looked like a stranger to her.

Carrot Top appeared alone, contriving to look more worried and forlorn than usual. He was empty-handed. He tried to appear nonchalant by whistling. Finally he gave it up, saying, " Oh, what's the use?—I'm not fooling anybody. I came to say good-bye, Mouche."

Mouche said, " Good-bye, dear Carrot Top."

" Will you miss me? "

" Oh yes, Carrot Top. I shall miss you terribly."

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" Will you be having children of your own, Mouche? "

" Yes."

" Will they be like us? "

" Oh, I hope so, I do hope so . . ."

Carrot Top was silent a moment and then said, " I didn't get you anything. I couldn't. I'll give you my love to take with you, Mouche."

Now the ache was closing her throat again. " Carrot Top! Do you really love me? " In all the time they had been together, he had never once said it.

The puppet nodded. " Oh yes. I always have. Only you never noticed. Never mind, it's too late now. Mouche, will you give *me* a going-away present? "

" Oh yes, Carrots. Anything I have."

" Will you sing a song with me? "

" Of course, Carrots. What shall it be? "

The little doll said, " Golo knows."

The Senegalese appeared and picked out an introduction on his guitar. It was her well-loved Breton lullaby. Mouche had not expected this. She did not know whether she could get through it.

Carrot Top held out his hand to her and she took it in both hers. When they had finished the song, Golo wandered away quietly into the wings and Carrot Top reached up and kissed Mouche's cheek.

" Don't forget us when you have children of your own, Mouche." He vanished beneath the counter.

The others came whipping up by twos, to cry, " Don't forget us, Mouche," and overwhelm her with pecks and kisses.

Mouche, her eyes now blinded by tears, opened her arms and cried to them as though there was no one else there but they and she, " Oh no, no! I can never forget you. My darlings, I shall never forget you. You will always be like my own children and as dear to me."

She hardly heard the band swing into their closing theme, or the heavy swish of the descending curtains, shutting them out from the tempest of applause and cheers from the audience in front. The last thing that Mouche saw and heard was Mr. Reynardo, his muzzle turned skyward, howling like a coyote, and Alifanfaron with his head buried in the folds of the side curtains of the puppet booth.

Then she fled to her dressing-room, locked the door, and putting her head down on her arms, wept. Nor could she be persuaded by knocks or shouts from without to open the door and emerge to take her bows. She felt as though she would cry endlessly for the rest of her life.

She would not open even when Balotte came to fetch her, and begged him to go, promising to meet him at his hotel in the morning and, finally, he too departed.

She remained sitting in the dark dressing-room for a long while.

On every stage in the world, at night after the performance is over,

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there stands a single, naked electric-light bulb. No spot seems as glaring as where the incandescence sheds its halo, no shadows as long and deep and grotesque as those lurking at the bulb's extreme range, spilling over flats and props, pieces of sets, and furniture.

Against the brick rear wall of the theatre, almost at the farthest edge of the illumination, yet visible, stood the deserted puppet booth, its white oilcloth sign, CAPITAINE COQ ET SA FAMILLE, barely legible.

Unseen in the shadows, squatting on his haunches, Golo sorrowed alone in the dark, in the manner of his people. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning, and the theatre was empty.

Mouche slipped from her dressing-room for the last time. She carried a small straw valise in which she had packed her few personal belongings. Her wardrobe she was leaving behind her, just as she was leaving a part of herself behind—the Mouche that had been and would never be again.

To reach the stage door it was necessary for her to cross the dark, cavernous stage. From the passageway she stepped into the wings beyond the range of the single light that would have guided her across.

And out of this darkness a hand reached and grasped her by the wrist, and another was placed across her mouth before she could cry out with the fright that momentarily stopped her heart.

Had the distant light reflected upon the pale, hate-ravaged features and red hair of Capitaine Coq, Mouche's heart might never have started beating again. But the hard callouses on the fingers covering her lips told their story, and the gleam of a single white eyeball completed the identification.

Golo whispered into her ear, " For the love of heaven, do not make a sound."

As quietly, Mouche asked against the pounding of her heart, " What is it, Golo? "

" I don't know. Something is happening. Stay here with me, Miss Mouche, but make no noise. Golo very much afraid."

He pulled her gently down to her knees beside him and she could feel that he was trembling.

" But, Golo—"

" Sh, Miss Mouche. Don't speak. Listen."

At first there was no sound but their own soft breathing. Then there came a faint rustling and scratching. It appeared to come from somewhere near the back of the stage. Golo pressed Mouche's hand hard, as the head of Carrot Top rose slowly above the counter of the puppet booth and reconnoitred carefully.

There was something horrible in the caution with which he looked to the right and to the left, and then with that extraordinarily lifelike movement with which he was endowed, leaned out from the ends of the booth and gazed behind as well: it was horrible, too, that no one was supposed to be there, that the performance was to an empty theatre, or perhaps even more horrible still, that it was no performance at all . . .

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Golo whispered, " He gone away early, but *they* came back. I knew they were here. I felt it."

It was Mouche's turn to quiet him and she pressed his arm gently and said, " Sh."

Having made certain there was no one about, Carrot Top retired to the far end of the counter and let his face sink into his hands and remained thus for a minute or two.

Then the quiet was disturbed by a rasping, gravelly whisper: " That you up there, Carrots? "

The red-headed puppet slowly lifted his head from his hands, looked down deliberately, and replied, " Yes."

" Is the coast clear? "

" Yes. There's nobody here."

" Where's the watchman? "

" Asleep in the boiler-room."

The head of the sharp-faced Fox arose from below. He too reconnoitred for a moment; then, satisfied, leaned on the counter at the opposite end from Carrot Top. Finally, the leprechaun said in a listless and woebegone voice, " Well, what do we do now? "

Reynardo sighed, then replied, " I don't know, if you don't. You've been running the show, Carrot Top. Kind of messed it up, didn't you, old fellow? "

Carrot Top reflected. " Did I? I suppose I did. I never thought she'd leave us for that knucklehead. She'll never be happy with him."

" Why didn't you tip her off? "

" Madame Muscat tried, but it was no use. She's too young to see that monkey will never think of anyone but himself."

" Is she really going to marry him, Carrot Top? "

" Oh yes. It's all over."

The Fox said, " Blast! "

Carrot Top reproved him. " Oh, cut it out, Rey. Swearing won't help. You know how *she* hated it. The thing is we've got to decide what to do. Is it any use going on? "

Mr. Reynardo replied, " Not as far as I'm concerned. She was the only thing I ever cared about. I'm ready to call it a day."

" Me too. I suppose we ought to put it to a vote."

" Uhuh. Take the chair, Carrots. I'll call the roll. Ali? "

The voice of the Giant came from below the counter. " I'm here, I think."

" Dr. Duclos? "

" Present."

" Gigi? "

" Yes."

" Madame Muscat? "

" Of course."

" Monsieur Nicholas? "

" Yes, yes."

Mr. Reynardo said, " All present and accounted for." And folded his arms.

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Carrot Top then made a little speech in a not too firm voice. "Ladies and gentlemen of our company. Inasmuch as our well-loved sister Mouche has left us to be married and will never return, I have called this meeting to decide what is to be done. The question before the committee of the whole is: shall we try to continue without her?"

Dr. Duclos commented, "What's the use if nobody comes to see us, Mr. Chairman?"

Reynardo turned it round: "What's the use if we can't see her?"

Gigi's voice remarked, "We could get someone like her to take her place."

Alifanfaron was heard to rumble: "Gee, I'm stupid, but even I know there's no one like her. Nobody could take her place."

Madame Muscat contributed, "Well, we had a show we used to do before she came to us."

The deep voice of Monsieur Nicholas sounded from below. "Do you wish to return to that? And sleeping in haystacks again? One can never go back."

Gigi's girlish treble inquired anxiously, "But if there isn't anything forward?"

"Then," replied Monsieur Nicholas, "perhaps the best idea is to go nowhere."

"Oh," exclaimed Carrot Top. "How?"

"Simply by ceasing to exist."

Carrot Top said, "Oh," again, and Reynardo rasped, "Ha ha, suits me," while Dr. Duclos said pompously, "Logically sound, I must admit, however unpleasant the prospect." Ali complained, "I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is if I can't be with Mouche, I want to die."

Mr. Reynardo sniggered. "That's the general idea, Ali, old boy. You've hit it for once. Put it to a vote, Mr. Chairman."

There was a moment of silence. Then Carrot Top said firmly, "All in favour of ceasing to exist say, 'Ay.'"

There was a chorus of ayes, and one squeaky no from Gigi.

Reynardo growled: "Motion carried. Proceed, Mr. Chairman."

"Now?" Carrot Top asked. There were no dissents.

He continued, "Next question—how?"

Dr. Duclos said: "I have always been fascinated by self-immolation; the Indian custom of suttee where the widow casts herself upon the funeral pyre of her deceased spouse . . ."

Reynardo said, "I don't see the connection, but the idea isn't bad. Fire is clean."

Carrot Top said, "There's a vacant lot behind the theatre."

Gigi suddenly wailed, "But I don't want to die."

Reynardo ducked down beneath the counter swiftly and came up with the half-doll that was Gigi, empty, her eyes staring vacuously, clamped in his jaws. Then he carefully dropped her over the side of the booth onto the stage, where she fell with a small crash that echoed shockingly through the empty theatre. "Then live, little golden-haired pig," he said.

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Mouche drew in her breath and whispered, " Poor, poor little Gigi . . ."

Mr. Reynardo looked over the side of the booth at the little heap lying on the stage and then asked, " Anybody else want to back out? "

Golo turned a stricken face towards Mouche. " They going to die. Don't let them, Miss Mouche."

Mr. Reynardo went over to Carrot Top and stuck out his paw. " So long, kid. It wasn't a bad ride while it lasted."

Carrot Top took it and shook it solemnly. " Good-bye, Rey. You've always been a friend. I'll go down and get things ready."

Mouche rose. Her knees were stiff from kneeling, her heart was pounding with excitement, and her throat was dry. She picked up her small valise and marched across the stage, her heels clicking on the boards and the single standing light picking up her slender shadow, speeding it ahead of her, and throwing it as a kind of prophecy of her coming athwart the puppet booth and its single inhabitant.

It was astonishing, this repetition of the first time that Mouche had encountered the puppets of Capitaine Coq. There was the same darkness with the single light to probe the shadows, there was the mysterious booth looming out of the shadow, a lone puppet perched on the counter, and the slender figure of a girl marching by, carrying a valise.

Except, now, the shoe was on the other foot and it was Mouche who paused in the spill of yellow light before the puppet booth and called to the small figure flattened on the counter there, " Hullo, baby! "

Mr. Reynardo, the composed, the cynical, and the self-assured, was taken aback. His whole frame shuddered as he reared up and peered through the gloom, for he was handicapped by having to look directly into the light.

His jaws moved silently several times and finally he managed to produce a croak: " Mouche! Where have you been? Have you been around here long? "

Mouche paused before the booth and set her valise down. She contemplated the agitated and nonplussed Fox jittering back and forth. Finally she said, " Never mind where I have been. I know where you are going. There is nothing to be found in the heart of flames but the ashes of regret. I'm ashamed of you all."

The Fox stopped flapping and contemplated her long and hard. " We didn't know you were here." Then he added, " We voted . . ."

" Was it a fair vote? " Mouche asked.

The Fox swallowed. " Well, maybe Monsieur Nicholas, Carrot Top, and I rigged it a little. But it was only because of you—going away and leaving us, I mean."

" And Gigi here? " Mouche bent over and picked up the empty doll.

The Fox looked uneasy. He flattened his head to the counter

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and thereby seemed to have moved his eyes guiltily. He said, " We pushed her out of the nest. We excommunicated her."

" We? "

" I did. She didn't love you."

" It was wrong, Rey."

He hung his head. " I know it. Don't leave us, Mouche."

" Rey, you're blackmailing me again, as you always have—with love! "

The hoarse voice of the Fox dropped to a rattling whisper again, " This time it isn't blackmail, Mouche. If you must go, take me with you."

" And leave the others? Rey, you can't desert them now."

The wary figure of the Fox stirred. He moved imperceptibly closer to where Mouche was standing. " Oh yes, I can. I don't care about anything or anybody. Let me come, Mouche. I'm housebroken. And you know me—gentle with children."

The old habits were so hard to break. Momentarily Mouche forgot about herself and that she had parted with all this, that this was the beginning of the morning that was to see her wedded to Balotte and a new and normal life. She went over to the booth, and bending over in her sweetly tender and concerned manner, admonished, " But don't you see, Rey, that's being disloyal? "

Mr. Reynardo appeared to ponder this for a moment. Then he moved closer and barely nuzzled the tip of his snout onto the back of Mouche's hand. He sighed deeply and said, " I've tried to be a good fellow, but it doesn't work—not unless you're around to keep me from backsliding."

She could not help herself. She placed a caressing hand upon the bristly red head; " My poor Rey . . ."

Instantly the Fox whipped his head into the hollow between neck and shoulder and was whispering, " Mouche—take care of me."

The touch of him was as always an exquisitely tender agony. Her heart swelled with love for this unhappy creature.

With startling suddenness, Alifanfaron bobbed up. " Oh gee, excuse me. Am I interrupting something? Goodness, it's Mouche. Are you back again, Mouche? If you're back again, I don't want to die any more."

The Fox grated: " Damn. Why did you have to come up just then? I nearly had her." He vanished.

Mouche said, " But, Ali dear, I cannot stay, I'm going to be married, and I don't want you to die . . . What shall I do? " They had all the deadly, logical illogicality of children.

" Take me along, Mouche. You don't know what it is to be a giant and stupid and lose a friend."

Mouche had heard herself say, " I'm going to be married . . ." but it was like something someone else said about another person. Where was that real world now, the world of sanity and things as they ought to be, to which she had been fleeing to save herself from complete destruction?

Dr. Duclos the Penguin, in formal attire as usual, his pince-nez

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attached to a black ribbon perched on the end of his beak, peered at her for a moment and then said, " So glad to see you're back. We've all missed you frightfully." He went away.

Carrot Top appeared, whistling a snatch of *Va-t'en, va-t'en*, and then, with a simulated surprise, discovered the girl standing at her accustomed place; slightly to the right of the centre of the booth. He said, " Oh hullo, Mouche. You still here? "

" I was just leaving. Carrot Top, come here."

He edged tentatively a little closer, but was wary. Mouche said, " I overheard everything. I couldn't help it. Aren't you ashamed? "

The puppet emitted a mortal wail, " I only want to be with you for ever, Mouche. Take me with you." He slithered across the counter and rested his head on Mouche's breast, and beneath the pressure of the little figure, she could feel the wild beating of her heart.

" Carrots—dear Carrots . . . I have always loved you."

The doll turned his head and looked her full in the face. " Do you? But you don't really love us, Mouche, not really, otherwise you couldn't go away."

A moan of pain, almost animal in its intensity, was torn from Mouche. She cried," Oh, I do, I do! I love you all. I have loved you so much and with all my heart. It is only him I hate so terribly that there is room for nothing else, not even love any more."

Standing there in the darkness, lost as it were in the centre of the vast universe of the empty stage, she could bring herself to speak to a doll the truth that she had never spoken to a human.

" I loved him. I loved him from the first moment I saw him. I loved him and would have denied him nothing. He took me and gave me only bitterness and evil in return for all I had for him, all the tenderness and love, all the gifts I had saved for him. My love turned to hate. And the more I hated him, the more I loved you all. Carrots, how long can such deep love and fearful hatred live side by side in one human being before the host goes mad? Carrots, Carrots, let me go . . ."

Yet she put up her hands and pressed the head of Carrot Top close to her neck, and suddenly Mr. Reynardo was there too, and the touch of the two little objects there made her wish to weep endlessly and hopelessly. She closed her eyes, wondering if her mind would crack.

She was startled by the shrill voice of Carrot Top, " But who are *we*, Mouche? "

The remark was echoed by Mr. Reynardo, but when she opened her eyes, the pair were gone and instead, Monsieur Nicholas was regarding her from behind the panes of his square spectacles.

The little figure had the effect of calming her momentarily, for the old habits were still strong. Here was her reliable friend and philosopher and counsellor, mender of broken toys and broken hearts, who inevitably appeared in the booth when matters threatened to get out of hand.

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Yet he too asked the question that brought her again close to panic: " Who are we all, my dear, Carrot Top and Mr. Reynardo, Alifanfaron and Gigi, Dr. Duclos and Madame Muscat, and even myself? "

Mouche began to tremble and held to the side of the booth lest she faint. Worlds were beginning to fall; defences behind which she had thought to live in safety and blindness were crumbling.

Who were they, indeed? And what had been the magic that had kept them separate, the seven who were so different, yet united in love and kindness, and the one who was so monstrous?

Monsieur Nicholas spoke again. " Think, Mouche. Whose hand was it you just took to you so lovingly when it was Carrot Top or Mr. Reynardo or Alifanfaron, and held it close to your breast, and bestowed the mercy of tears upon it? "

Mouche suppressed a cry of terror. " The hand that struck me across the mouth—" she gasped, and her own fingers went to her lips as though in memory of that pain.

" Yet you loved it, Mouche. And those hands loved and caressed you—"

Mouche felt her senses beginning to swim, but now it was she who asked the question, " But who are you, then, Monsieur Nicholas? Who are you all? "

Monsieur Nicholas seemed to grow in stature, to fill the booth with his voice and presence as he replied: " A man is many things, Mouche. He may wish, like Carrot Top, to be a poet and soar to the stars, and yet be earthbound and overgrown, ugly and stupid, like Alifanfaron. In him will be the seeds of jealousy, greed, and the insatiable appetite for admiration and pleasure of chicken-brained, arrogant Gigi. Part of him will be a pompous bore like Dr. Duclos, and another the counterpart of Madame Muscat, gossip, busybody, tattletale, and sage. And where there is a philosopher, there can also be the sly, double-dealing, sanctimonious hypocrite, thief, and self-forgiving scoundrel like Mr. Reynardo."

And Monsieur Nicholas continued: " The nature of man is a never-ending mystery, Mouche. There we are, seven of us you have grown to love. And each of us has given you what there was of his or her heart. I think I even heard the wicked Reynardo offer to lay down his life for you—or his skin. He was trying to convey to you a message from him who animates us all."

" No, no . . . No more! " Mouche pleaded. " Stop, I cannot bear it! "

" Evil cannot live without good," Monsieur Nicholas said in a voice that was suddenly unlike his own. " All of us would rather die than go on without you."

" Who is it? Who is speaking? " Mouche cried.

And then, on a powerful impulse, hardly knowing what she was doing, she reached across the booth to the curtain through which she could be seen but could not see, and with one motion stripped away the veil that for so long had separated her from the wretched, unhappy man hiding there.

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He sat there immovable as a statue, gaunt, hollow-eyed, bitter, hard, uncompromising, yet dying of love for her.

The man in black with the red hair, in whose dead face only the eyes still lived, was revealed with his right hand held high, his fingers inside the glove that was Monsieur Nicholas. In his left was crumpled in a convulsive grip the limp puppet of Monsieur Reynardo. It was as though he were the balancing scale between good and evil, and evil and good. Hatred and love, despair and hope played across his features, illuminating them at times, like lightning playing behind storm clouds, with an unearthly beauty —Satan before the fall.

And to Mouche, who passed in that moment over the last threshold from child to womanhood, there came, with blinding clarity and understanding, the vision of a man who had tried to be and live a life of evil—who, to mock God and man, had perpetrated a monstrous joke by creating his puppets like man, in His image, and filling them with love and kindness.

And in the awful struggle within him that confronted her, she read his punishment. He who loved only wickedness and corruption had been corrupted by the good in his own creations. The seven dolls of his real nature had become his master and he their victim. He could live only through them and behind the curtain of his booth.

And in one last blinding flash, Mouche knew the catalyst that could save him. It was herself. But he could not ask for her love. He would not and could not ask. In that flash she thought for an instant of the story of Beauty and the Beast, which had always touched her oddly as a child, and knew that here was the living Beast, who must die of the struggle if she did not take pity on him.

Yet it was not pity but love that made Mouche reach out her arms towards him across the counter of the puppet booth where they had duelled daily for the past year and cry: "Michel—Michel! Come to me!"

No time seemed to have passed, yet he was out of the booth and they were clinging desperately to one another. Trembling, holding him, Mouche whispered: "Michel . . . Michel. I love you. I do love you, no matter who or what you are. I cannot help myself. It is you I love, you that I have always loved."

It was she who held him secure, his red head, as stiff and bristly as that of Mr. Reynardo, sheltered in the hollow of her neck and shoulder where so often his hand, unrecognized, had leaned. And the desperation of his clinging was the greater as he murmured her name again and again: "Mouche . . . Mouche . . . Mouche . . ." and hid his face from hers.

"Michel . . . I love you. I shall never leave you."

Then it was, finally, that Mouche felt something warm trickling over the hand that held to her the ugly, beautiful, evil, but now transfigured head, and knew that they were the tears of a man who never in his life had yielded to them before and who, emerging from the long nightmare, would be made for ever whole by love.

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And thus they remained on that darkened, empty stage for a long while as Michel Peyrot, alias Capitaine Coq, surrendered his person and his soul to what had been so fiercely hateful and unbearable to him: the cloister of an innocent and loving woman and the receiving and cherishing of love.

Nor did they stir even when an old negro with a white patch over one eye shuffled across the stage and, looking over the counter of the booth into the darkness of the mysterious quarters below, chuckled: "Oh ho, little boss! You, Carrot Top! Mr. Reynardo! Dr. Duclos, Ali, Madame Muscat! Where are you all? You better come up here and learn the news. Miss Mouche is not going to leave us. She is going to stay with us for ever."

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS
to
SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE
on page 16

★

1. *The tailor, for whom the mice sewed thousands of stitches,* so *small, in "The Tailor of Gloucester," by Beatrix Potter.*

2. *David Wylie, who offered three hundred pounds to John Shand on condition that he married David's sister, in "What Every Woman Knows," by James Barrie.*

3. *Jack, who sold his mother's cow for a handful of beans, in the nursery fable of "Jack and the Beanstalk." One of the prizes Jack brought from the home of the giant was a hen that laid golden eggs.*

4. *King Stephen, in Iago's song from Shakespeare's "Othello."*

5. *Dr. Faustus, who sold his soul to Mephistopheles, in Christopher Marlowe's play, "Dr. Faustus."*

6. *The poet to himself, in "Dream-Pedlary," by Thomas Lovell Beddoes.*

7. *Silas, after losing his gold, found the child Eppie, in "Silas Marner," by George Eliot.*

8. *Michael Henchard, who sold his wife to Richard Newson, in "The Mayor of Casterbridge," by Thomas Hardy.*

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THE SENORITA AND THE TEXAN

He saw Maria trying to say something with her eyes, a warning

by JAMES NORMAN

THE pinkish core of the valley sizzled under the Mexican sun as Bell's jeep bounced over the rutted road, stirring up dust that billowed and settled upon the rows of maguey plants which seemed to march off in silent files towards the distant rim of lavender hills.

Sivca was the place—a valley and town set in a region of sharp ridges and vivid slopes, isolated enough to have avoided telephones and electricity. The town, with its several Spanish-style houses capped by red-tiled roofs, a plaza, and a crumbling church, lay behind Sam Bell, perhaps a mile back, when he came to the Quintana ranch. The ranch had a rim of high stone walls and a few buildings baking in the lonely heat.

He drove through the great gateway, skirted a partly shaded corral where a huge black bull drowsed, and parked near the house. As he stared towards the iron grille of the *rejas* that grimaced outward from the windows like gnashing teeth, a feeling of tension stirred him. In town, they had warned him that Luis Quintana would entertain either graciously or with a bullet, depending on his mood.

The Quintanas were ranchers. Bell knew they were not wealthy, yet they were the most important people in the region. He had seen them in town: the father, Don Luis; his two sons; the girl, Maria. The girl was young and attractive, in a way that pleased him. As for the Quintana men, they were cut to a pattern, like snub-nosed bullets of different calibres. Each had the same hard, dark look. There was only a difference of age between them.

Bell was met at the door by the girl, who frowned at him in a determined manner. If she had noticed him at all while in town, she didn't show it.

"Is Don Luis in?" he asked, and at the same time half turned his head towards the battered jeep. The lettering on the sides and hood of the vehicle were his visiting-card. They read: UNIT C, COMMISSION FOR THE ERADICATION OF AFTOSA. To the few people in this remote district who could read, it signified that

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the Mexican government empowered him to go round looking into the mouths of cattle.

"From the Aftosa?" the girl murmured. Her voice was soft and sweet, without being cloying. Now her manner changed curiously. She made Bell feel as if she had been waiting for him and already knew a great deal about him.

She led him across a dusty patio and into a large, gloomy room furnished with appalling turn-of-the-century pieces. Here, Don Luis received him.

Bell was again struck by the man's features. Quintana's face showed Spanish parentage: a fine solid face that was quick and dark and vigorous. The rancher motioned towards a dusty chair.

"Sit, please," he said. "Maria tells me you come from the Aftosa?" Bell nodded and took the chair.

"There were others from the Aftosa," Don Luis said.

Bell shrugged. He was aware that people in Sivca hardly expected him to last any longer than the other foot-and-mouth inspectors and veterinaries who had probed this area before him.

"Yes, there were others here," he said. He glanced towards the girl and saw that she watched him with interest.

Don Luis looked at him shrewdly, as if he wanted to look through the lean Texan, to weigh the intent of those forthright eyes that were so blue and clear they seemed utterly disarming.

"The work is important," Bell went on. "The government has ordered that all cattle, sick or healthy, be inoculated. You've blocked our work here."

"I've seen no disease here," Quintana cut in.

"No. Not here. But there was an outbreak in Santa Isabel, five hours from here. There aren't many cases left in Mexico. We've cleaned it out." Bell fished in his pocket, drew out a glass syringe, and tapped his knee with it. "This, and a rifle, when needed, have done it."

"It kills them!" Quintana said harshly.

"It kills nothing."

Quintana turned suddenly to his daughter. "Go tell Juan to bring El Pastor." When the girl had gone, Quintana frowned. "When do you leave Sivca? Tonight?"

Bell shook his head. "My job is to hire men for my team and to inoculate the area." The rancher gave a harsh laugh and cut it so short it was like walking from sunlight into darkness. He stared with an inexplicable, cold suspicion that puzzled Bell.

There was a sound at the door. Bell turned, and his eyes widened. He smiled incredulously. A young man, but with the same memorable, dark features as Don Luis, led a great black bull into the room. He brought the animal to Quintana.

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In this instant, the rancher's mood changed. He became less harsh. He motioned towards the young man, saying, "This is Juan, my son." Then resting his hand on the bull's solid neck, he spoke with pride: "Here is El Pastor. *Qué bruto, eh?*"

The animal was monumental, obviously a bull of very fine strain. The bull stared indifferently about the room, as though he visited often and were making certain the furniture had not been rearranged. Don Luis rubbed his head as though he were absent-mindedly caressing an old and faithful mistress.

Bell suddenly began to grin. Something in this crazy gesture increased his liking for Quintana. He nodded towards the heavy-breathing bull, "What strain? Pasteje? Pasteje and what?"

Both Quintana and his son gave him a sharp glance, as if they had not expected this foreigner to know breed and stock. "Pasteje," Don Luis replied. "Pasteje and a little Spanish. I could raise fighting bulls, but I do not." He added, "Look at him carefully, señor. Now, is there illness in him?"

The smell of the animal, the black gleaming flanks, the great muscular hump above the shoulders, and the small intelligent eyes of the beast fascinated Bell. It was evident that the disease called *aftosa*, festering the mouth and hoof of an animal, had no lodging here. There were no blisters on the tongue or where the hide lay thin. The only disease that could strike an animal of such health would be anthrax, which comes unannounced.

"Does he not look well?" Don Luis demanded.

"Big and healthy," Bell agreed.

"*Pues*, then he needs no inoculation," Quintana replied with sudden harshness. "Nor do the cattle anywhere in the valley. El Pastor is father of the valley."

Bell caught the older man's challenging glance. He looked at the bull again. The entire spectacle of the animal in this elaborate room struck him as being oddly grotesque.

He turned his glance to Quintana. With a patient smile, he said, "He needs inoculation. All the cattle should have it."

The rancher jerked his head towards the doorway. "There is the door, señor. Remember there will be no inoculations in this valley. For every animal you touch, there'll be a bullet!"

After he had been shown from the house, Bell sat for a moment in the jeep and stared at the now-deserted corral. He tried to put some order in the impressions he had got.

Through the four years he had worked with the Commission, he had become familiar with trouble. There had been the flaring resentment of peons against this meddling with their livestock, or frequently, in regions as remote as this, their smouldering distrust of government people. Still, he had never run into a

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thing like this: one man, the key to the entire area, and that incredible bull in the parlour.

He shrugged indifferently. A year ago, or less, he would have waded into the trouble. Now, because this was to be his last job with the Commission before he returned to the States, he felt somewhat amused by the interview with Quintana.

Suddenly he was aware that someone had come up beside the jeep. It was the girl. She was alone, and she stopped on the far side, resting her hand on the seat frame. She looked at Bell with remote inquiry. " My father was very angry, yes? "

Bell smiled. " I've had others angry with me."

" Will you leave Sivca? " He made an indefinite motion with his hand and stared at her. She was cool and nice to look at, the most maturely feminine young woman he had met in years. He was aware of the attraction she had for him.

" If you stay," she asked, " will you call in the troops? " Her dark eyes looked at him directly, searchingly. " That would be bad, señor. There'll be trouble. My father says there has never been a garrison here."

Bell smiled. " You seem to understand my problems."

There was a rich warmth in her eyes as she looked straight at him. " I do know," she said. " I went to school in Morelia."

" Morelia." Bell nodded. It was as if what she had said established her in his world rather than of this valley.

" Where do you come from, señor? "

" Texas." He motioned to the empty seat at his side. " Please, sit down for a moment."

She shook her head. " I can't stay. My father will be angry."

" Stubborn man, isn't he? " The girl had turned to leave. Now she paused, " You don't understand, señor."

Bell chuckled softly. " He's afraid I'll harm his bull. Or he's against government men. Which? "

" It's much more," she replied quickly. " My father has reason. My mother died from medicine injected." She stared at him as though she expected him to doubt it, and went on, " Four years ago, she was ill. The doctor in Sivca gave her injections of a new medicine. My father didn't trust it. He wanted Dr. Salazar to call in another doctor from Santa Isabel. But Salazar had faith in his drug. My father thinks it was what killed my mother." She hesitated, then: " You do not believe it was the drug? "

" Who knows? " Bell replied with sympathy. " Sometimes mistakes are made. Or the illness had gone too far."

The girl nodded slowly, still staring at him with that open curiosity and acceptance of things. The expression in her eyes

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appealed to him because there seemed to be no challenge or resentment in it. It made him want so much to know her.

The memory of her smile, with its faint impression of longing, stayed in his mind as he drove into town and parked the jeep in front of Romero's place, in the narrow, hot, cobbled street below the plaza. I must ask Romero about her, he thought.

In Sivca, which had neither hotel nor restaurant, Romero's *tienda* served as Bell's headquarters. The place was a kind of general store and bar.

Romero slid from behind the counter and greeted Bell cheerfully. "Señor, what does Quintana say? Does he agree?"

"Not yet," Bell grinned.

"Then you had better go. You waste your time in Sivca."

Bell offered a nod of greeting to the other men in the store. There were four of them; men wearing dusty clothes and big straw sombreros. He moved towards the counter, took the tepid beer Romero offered, lifted his bottle to the other men. They raised theirs in return. Polite and silent.

"I'm not going yet," he said to Romero. "These Quintanas interest me." He looked thoughtfully at the *tienda*-keeper. "I have a feeling Quintana is afraid of me. He's afraid to let me test even one animal such as the bull."

Romero's mouth sagged. He drew in a quick breath, saying, "You want to get killed, señor?"

Bell was aware that the other men were staring at him intently, as though looking for signs of drunkenness. He shrugged casually, saying, "Some men lack courage. It's odd how it shows."

An uneasy silence settled upon the *tienda*. It was only after the other men had filed out that Romero spoke again. "Do you know what you've done?" he exclaimed. "In this region you don't make insults unless you're armed."

Bell nodded. "Perhaps Quintana will pay me a visit."

"He'll hear what you said. You can be certain."

"You afraid I'll bring trouble here?"

"Here? There have been shootings before, in this very place. But I'm thinking of you, man. Perhaps you haven't heard of Dr. Salazar?"

"He took care of Quintana's wife."

Romero nodded. "The one. Well, he was shot. He had three Quintana bullets in him."

Bell took another swallow from the bottle and watched Romero. He knew enough of this back country not to inquire whether the Quintanas had been arrested. There were no police here. In these tortuous valleys, even government troops met sudden opposition. "Didn't the doctor have relatives?" he finally asked.

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" The doctor had no one, so there was no revenge," Romero replied.

" What did the Quintana girl think? "

" Maria? " Romero shrugged. " It was not a woman's business."

" She's not married, or promised, is she? "

Romero suddenly turned, glancing at Bell curiously. " You're not looking towards her? " When Bell did not answer, he quickly added, " Take my advice, man. Get out."

Shortly after sunset, the youngest of the Quintana men, Juan, walked into the *tienda*, looking for Bell. He surprised Romero by coming unarmed. In a quick, resentful voice, he gave Bell a message from his father. It was that Don Luis ordered Bell to come to the ranch the following day. He would permit the vaccination of one animal as a test.

When young Quintana had gone, Romero shook his head warningly. " You'll be walking into a bullet, perhaps three," he said.

Next morning, while a cool haze still clung to the distant mountains, Bell drove into the Quintana place and halted the jeep beside the corral where El Pastor was kept. Some men had already gathered there. They were men from the valley who had come to witness the test.

On seeing them, some of the tension ran out of Bell. Quintana had said " test," and there would be one.

Three riders cantered towards him from beyond the corral. He recognized Don Luis and the two sons, Juan and Emilio. Mounted easily on wiry range horses, wearing big-brimmed hats, they looked alike as bullets in a belt. The horses snorted and stirred up dust as they were reined in before the jeep.

" *Buenos dias*," Bell saluted Don Luis. " You sent word that I might begin inoculating? "

Quintana gave a nod of agreement. " One animal," he replied.

Bell unpacked his syringe kit, the inoculation tags, and the chilled bottle of serum from the portable ice-chest in the jeep. He looked up at Quintana, saying, " El Pastor? "

" Not the bull," Don Luis said quietly.

Bell halted. The older man pointed at a fat, dusty sow rooting near the corral gate, adding, " Stick your poison in that."

Bell stared at the man and at his sons. For an instant his anger welled up. The big bull had become a symbol for him just as it was, undoubtedly, for every rancher in the region.

" I came to do the bull," he insisted.

" The pig only," replied Don Luis. " If it does not get sick, I'll think further."

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Bell glanced toward the sow. Certainly, he could inoculate it. For a veterinary it would be as good a test as any. But Quintana had not offered it in this light. Bell sensed that the man had deftly put him in a position of ridicule.

"This is a farce," he said, and began to put his kit away.

He saw the girl, Maria, come out from the ranch house and stand a little apart from the men. Maria was watching him questioningly.

Then he heard Quintana laugh.

His anger came up again. He paused, looking up, and speaking quietly: "In this region," he said, "people may know why you're against what I do. But over in Santa Isabel and the neighbouring valleys, others may laugh. They'll think the Quintanas are afraid of a needle and a little medicine such as they themselves have already put in their cattle."

His words seemed to reach the Quintanas slowly. He saw Maria trying to say something with her eyes: a warning.

Suddenly, Emilio Quintana's hand darted towards his holstered gun. At the same instant, the crop of Don Luis's whip came down across his son's hand, not striking it but stopping the draw.

The rancher stared down at Bell rigidly, and yet, in spite of his controlled anger, there was a flare of amusement in his dark eyes. Without glancing at his sons or the other ranchers, he nodded, saying, "Very well, you can do the cattle."

Bell let out his breath softly. "El Pastor?"

"*Si*, the bull, but if the animal dies, it is your responsibility."

"My responsibility?"

"Naturally. If the bull dies, I'll hold you responsible. No matter where you go, I'll find you. And there'll be a bullet."

"An animal can die of many things," Bell objected.

"Are you afraid, gringo? Do you distrust your medicine?" The rancher smiled tightly.

Someone among the onlookers laughed guardedly. But oddly, it was not the laughter nor the cold regard of the Quintana men that touched Bell most at this moment.

He was aware, rather, of the girl. Her eyes were upon him, clear and strangely incurious, seeming to accept what she saw without emotion.

Abruptly, Bell took his kit, and with a quick nod towards Don Luis, he strode across the morning sunlight to the corral. When he slid through the bars, no one moved to help him with the bull. The men watched silently, measuring him against their ways and their valley. They observed his sureness in the corral. When he had secured the bull, and began preparing the syringe and serum, they moved in closer.

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The inoculation was a simple matter—needle under the tough hide, the serum forced in, raising a fistlike lump where it gathered.

Quintana eyed the swelling suspiciously. "What is that?" he demanded.

"Nothing," replied Bell.

"Does it go away?"

"Not always. It's one way we have of knowing if the animals have already been vaccinated." He straightened up, and while packing his kit, added, "You needn't worry about it. You know where to find me."

By afternoon there was a change in the valley. Suspicion had vanished. Bell was able to hire men for his team. He instructed them briefly in the work that would begin the next day. Then he drove to Santa Isabel to get the ice that kept his store of serum chilled. The following noon he returned to Sivca, and as he halted the jeep in the plaza, he was aware that people watched him with a kind of static caution. Then the Quintana girl darted out from the deep-shadowed *portales*, intercepting him.

"Go away! Go back to Santa Isabel!" she cried breathlessly. "El Pastor is dead!"

"Dead?" A sense of numbness went through Bell. He stared blankly at the girl's earnest features.

"Go, señor! They're looking for you. They're at Romero's."

Bell nodded gravely. The feeling of numbness thinned away, replaced now by admiration for the girl. In this country, with its strange, violent feuds, a woman did not normally cross the men of her family, no matter how she felt. He put his hand on hers and pressed gently, with feeling.

"You go?" she asked quickly.

He nodded. Switching on the ignition, he eased the jeep ahead, but instead of turning back towards Santa Isabel, he headed into the street leading to Romero's. Behind him, he heard Maria's voice crying out across the plaza, "Señor Bell! Señor Bell!"

The street was deserted, overlaid with an atmosphere as brittle as glass. In the dead, vertical heat surrounding Romero's place, he saw the three Quintana horses. He halted the jeep near them, then slid from the seat, and walked slowly, with a wary stiffness, towards the *tienda*. His mouth was dry as he came to the doorway and paused.

The Quintanas sat at the round plank table; their guns set upon it like eating utensils untidily placed. Romero stood nervously behind the counter. Bell glanced briefly back towards the street. People were cautiously leaving their houses.

He moved towards the table, halting before Luis Quintana. "*Buenos*," he said.

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Quintana looked at him steadily. "The animal is dead, señor."

Bell cleared the dryness from his mouth. "I know," he nodded. "But what killed him?"

"Poison," Don Luis replied flatly. A flicker of anger lighted his eyes.

"Yesterday the bull was good. This morning, black ran from his mouth and nostrils. He's dead."

"Anthrax—you know that. It kills quick. It had nothing to do with the inoculation."

The rancher glanced at his gun. "The medicine," he said stubbornly.

Bell waited, motionless, his eye upon the guns. He felt the sweat of fear sweep down his body in a single cold, exhausting stream of pain. Then Romero's tense voice came across the room. "Have mercy! The man isn't armed!"

The sound did something for Bell. The cold impulses to fight, to run, to hide, dissolved through his spine and became enamelled over. Now, as though the pistols were not there, he slowly pulled back a chair and sat down, facing the Quintanas.

He called to Romero, "Go upstairs and get my kit and serum." Looking directly at Don Luis, he added, "You'll permit it?"

The rancher frowned. A slight flexing of his wrist was the only sign of agreement. The box was brought. Bell flipped back the cover and took out a carton of serum bottles. He shoved it between himself and Quintana.

"These are the same as the serum I put into El Pastor," he said. "I want you to choose one."

Don Luis stared at the bottles with suspicious query.

"Choose one," Bell repeated. "It is the least you can do."

Quintana hesitated, then touched one of the tiny bottles. Bell nodded. Through the penetrating aroma of rawness in the hot room, he sensed that the Quintanas were puzzled and resentful. It was what he wanted. They were like men caught in a web.

He opened the kit, selected a needle and syringe, and forced his hands to work steadily, revealing no tension as he pulled the serum from the bottle. He rolled up his sleeve.

"He's making time," Emilio Quintana spoke impetuously.

"Not time," replied Bell. "Just another test. I've never seen this vaccine tried on a man. I don't know what it can do." He looked at Don Luis, adding quietly, "But I have faith in it."

He handed the syringe to Romero. "All right, Romero. Stick me."

"Good lord, man!" Romero gasped. "I'm no doctor."

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" Go ahead. Where I swabbed the alcohol. It isn't difficult. It's like sticking a needle into an orange."

Romero's moist hands shook. He pushed the needle in with difficulty, then released the serum. Bell watched the great ugly welt form under the skin, while around him he heard the uneven breathing of Romero and the Quintanas.

Somewhere outside, a bell tolled. Don Luis glanced towards the doorway and frowned. Bell's glance followed. In the doorway, silhouetted against the bright glare of the street, he saw Maria. She was watching with an expression of sadness and resignation. Suddenly a chair scraped and, alert and taut, Bell jerked his eyes back to the table.

Don Luis was standing, and his sons were rising on each side. The rancher reached for his gun and slowly eased it into his holster. He stared at Bell's arm as though cruelly fascinated by what the needle had done. Without a word, without looking back, he and his sons walked from the *tienda*.

Bell gave a convulsive shudder of cold nausea. He leaned back in the chair, and he heard Romero exhale until it became almost a whistle. " You're not going to die, man? " the storekeeper asked.

" No. I'll be all right."

" But the medicine, it's for animals."

Bell smiled faintly. " It shouldn't bother me. I know what's in it. Mostly aluminium hydroxide."

" Is that bad? "

" No. It's like swallowing a frying pan."

A few men slipped into the store, gazing curiously at Bell and Romero. Bell rose and went to the doorway and stared up the street. He saw the Quintanas on their horses and the girl, mounted side-saddle, up behind her father. They were riding out towards the edge of town. He saw Maria look back and smile. It was a good smile, full of understanding and knowledge.

He raised his arm and waved. Romero's voice came at his back. " Señor, you take such chances for that girl."

" I'm going to marry her," Bell nodded.

" *Pues*," Romero chuckled, " I think she knows it well. And her father knows, too. I do not think you'll have trouble. I saw respect in Don Luis."

★ ★ ★

LOW LIFE

Listen! There never was an artistic period.
There never was an Art-loving nation.

J. McNEILL WHISTLER

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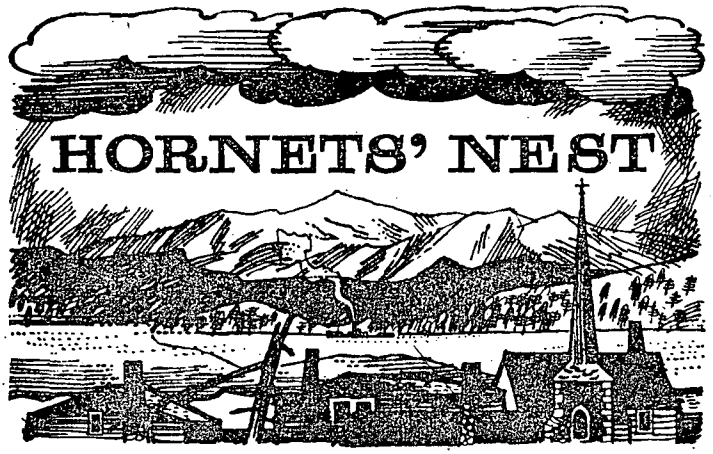

by CHRISTOPHER LANDON

To Marianne Rassmussen, Heskin was the man whose passport he carried: the much-travelled Erik Bergman, agent. But all that Heskin knew with certainty of Bergman was the genuineness of his photograph—the photo that was such an astonishing likeness of Heskin himself.

This striking resemblance had led the gravely injured Bergman to offer Heskin his passport and all his money, if Heskin would swear to continue Bergman's dangerous mission in Norway.

Heskin, a bank clerk on the run, (who had robbed his bank to escape the deadly boredom of routine) had met Bergman in a first-class smoker of the Edinburgh express. In his precise English, Bergman had commented on their uncanny resemblance.

Suddenly, a splintering roar had swept the express as the crash came, and smashed coaches piled up. Heskin, injured himself, had agreed to Bergman's dying request to take his identity, and changing over the contents of their pockets, had strained to memorize his last faltering words: If sold to the right people, rich for life . . . She has map but does not know where. Don't trust. Credit Norske Bank, Bergen. Nordkapp. Under the Hornets' Nest.

Shadowed in hospital, where he had received a letter from the unknown Marianne Rassmussen asking him to meet her in Bergen: shadowed to Norway by the inescapable Graustein, Heskin had parried prying questions by inventing a fiancée, and Marianne Rassmussen had cynically accepted his warning message to behave as a fiancée when they met. Heskin was still aware of his shock of

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surprised admiration at their first encounter that morning—her shining yellow hair, the soft touch of her cheek, the quiet "Erik, dearest," with which this lovely and mysterious stranger had greeted him, under Graustein's searching gaze. On her, Heskin's whole future depended. Was she ally or enemy? Would she guard or betray the mutual secret to which each held part of the clue?

Adjusting the sling on his arm as he entered her flat, Heskin recalled the cool threat in her tone that morning: Erik Bergman, when we talk, I shall insist that you tell me everything . . .

THE flat was in a large block, on the fourth floor. It was small and spotlessly clean. The big windows, bare polished floor, and birch furniture gave everything a clear, light airiness. But even with the gay cushions, it had not the look of a woman's place.

As Heskin lowered his bag to the floor and stared round him, Marianne went to the inner door that stood ajar. She tossed a sentence over her shoulder as she went through. Before the door clicked shut behind her, he had a glimpse of the bedroom, the end of a divan, the corner of the dressing-table on which stood a large photograph in a silver frame.

He stayed quite still when she had gone. She had said that whisky and glasses were in the cupboard. He wanted that drink, but he could not take it—she had spoken in Norwegian, and he was determined not to divulge to her his childhood knowledge of the language.

They had come from the hotel via the bank, and the last had not held any of the terrors he had imagined. After the scrutiny of passport and letter, it had just been a question of some clumsily contrived "Erik Bergman" signatures from the arm in the sling before he had come out with another letter of credit and a well-lined wallet. He had sat back in the cab through the last stage of the journey, scarcely conscious of the risk that was past, thinking only of the test that was looming nearer every moment.

When she came out of the bedroom, she walked straight past him into the little hall. He heard a key turn in the lock. She came back, slipping something into her pocket. "In case you resent this—and think to take the key away, I shouldn't. I had Resistance training in the war. You would get hurt." She was still speaking Norsk.

He tried to keep his face expressionless. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

The line of her jaw hardened. "Don't you want a drink?"

"Yes, please."

"I told you to help yourself." She turned towards the cupboard and there was a clink of bottle on glass. She came over with a drink in one hand, and pointed to the armchair with the other. "You had better sit there."

He made a vague, defensive gesture with his hands. "Can't we stick to English?"

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She stared at him. "English, English—why always this English? Are you afraid—or ashamed—of your own tongue?" Then she looked away. "Any language you like, as long as we get started."

"Where do we start?"

"With you talking—a lot." There was finality in her voice.

"You will understand the choice of English in a moment," he said quietly, "for I'm going to tell you a long story. I don't for a moment expect you will believe it—though it happens to be true. All I ask is that you hear me through to the end."

"Go on." It came more easily than Heskin had thought, as he began to tell her the truth: the bank, his flight, the meeting with Erik Bergman in the train, and then the railway crash. It was so close that he seemed to be reliving those anxious days in hospital, conscious of his relief at being automatically accepted as Bergman. Through it all, he did not look at her. He wondered if she was watching him, and when it was done, turned to see. She sat, staring straight ahead. "I've thrown myself on your mercy—completely—by telling you all this," he said.

Her voice seemed to come from a long way off: level, hard, almost disdainful. "You are not Erik Bergman?"

"No."

"But an English bank clerk—a thief—who has taken Bergman's name to escape from the country? You have never been to Norway before, and do not speak our language?"

"That is right."

"Then—why come to me?"

"I told you. You wrote—and I had to come to Bergen to collect his money. I had no other. And I wanted to help."

"How could you—?"

Now he was angry and tried to match his tone to hers. "There is one thing I haven't told you. *I know where.*"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Bergman told me just before he died. You do not know. And, in case you think you can steal it—" he touched his forehead—"the knowledge is only here."

"And you will tell me this—?"

"Only when you *believe* what I have told you."

There was a silence. "You don't believe it, do you?" he said.

"No. Not one word of it. Though it is a clever story. Very clever, it covers everything. I shall have to think, but for the moment, I am inclined to let you try to convince me. So we will go on."

She rose to her feet. "As long as you understand one thing—that if there is the slightest suspicion of funny business on your part, I shall hand you over to the police."

He almost laughed. "That wouldn't help you. You couldn't prove a thing. The police have closed the case."

She smiled. "I wasn't thinking of the English police. I meant ours, here. They have long memories."

"What do you mean—?"

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"Oh, nothing." Abruptly, she changed the subject, "Wasn't it difficult—at the bank, I mean—about his signature?"

"I've practised, copied from his passport—that's why I kept the sling. In case it wasn't quite right."

"You think of everything," she said.

It seemed a very long time that he sat watching her pace up and down, lighting cigarette after cigarette, dragging at them in jerks, stubbing them out half smoked. Suddenly she said, "I'm going to telephone," and went into the bedroom, closing the door.

Treachery? He strained hard to listen: he dared not move from the chair, and her voice was only a murmur through the door. She made two local calls, for he heard her dial, and one trunk-call which took a long time to come through. She seemed to do most of the talking.

When she came back, she helped herself to her first drink and he saw, with regret, it was the last of the bottle. Then she went to the window, parting the net curtains to stare down into the street for a long time. The silence hung heavy between them.

"Come here, Erik." She said it suddenly, but he did not move.

"That's not my name," he said.

"It will have to be. Come here."

She did not turn round when he was beside her; just pointed downwards through the chink in the curtain.

"Do you see—down there? In the archway, in the shadow?"

He stared down into the chasm between them and the block that reared up opposite. "There's a man, I think. I can't see very well. I suppose he's waiting for his girl—"

"Waiting for us, Erik. I saw him clearly a moment ago. A little fair-haired man in a brown jacket. The same one who was waiting in the lounge of the Bristol when I came down from your room. Now, I am sure—"

She turned to face him. "You asked if I believed you, and I said, not a word of it. I mean that. All I believe is there," she jabbed her hand downwards, "the common enemy. That must be dealt with first. You and I must come to terms later."

Her urgency reached out to him. "What do we do—?"

"Move on—and quickly. I'm going to see about it now." She was in the hall, putting on a coat. "It is better I go alone. And, for my peace of mind, I shall lock you in."

He threw his wallet on the table. "Isn't that security enough?"

"No. You could always cancel that letter of credit and get another. Also, it is as much to stop others getting in—as you getting out. But I need some money. I shall keep an account."

She pulled some notes from the wallet and put it back. She was at the door before he said, "Your English, where did you learn it?"

"At school: then I was in England for some time. Surely you must have embroidered that bit to Herr Graustein—when you were telling him of your fiancée . . .?"

He was puzzled, and her stare made him uncomfortable.

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"No. I told you that was a slip—I just covered it like that, without going into detail."

She said, "I've thought a lot about that part. It was a master touch to make us engaged. Did you really not tell him of our mutual interest?"

She was through the door before he could answer, and rage welled in him as he heard the key turn in the lock. He walked to the window and stared down into the street. After two or three minutes he saw a figure detach itself from the archway opposite and stroll off to the left. The foreshortened, angular figure was too far below to identify, but it had a brown coat, and the timing was right: She would just be coming out into the street. In a way, it was comforting to know there was a common enemy.

He passed the rest of the time in a futile search of the flat. There was only one thing he found, and that was not a clue, only further bewilderment.

In the bedroom, on the dressing-table, there was no photograph. It was a small point, but he could swear he had seen one there through the door when they had first come in. A photo of a man. He bent down and squinted along the top of the table. There was a long, faint mark in the film of the day's dust. The photo had been there—and she had put it away.

She was back within the hour, coming in quickly to place a brown-paper package on the table.

"You were followed," he said. "I saw it from the window."

"Yes, I know. He wasn't very clever, and perhaps it may be a good thing. He was just behind me when I got the tickets and he must have heard where they were for."

"Tickets?"

"Yes. We leave for Oslo on the night train. The fares and sleepers were 220 kroner. Then I went to the Vinmonopol. That was another 50. Here is your change."

"Vinmonopol?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Sorry. I forgot you know nothing about Norway. The Vinmonopol is the State wine store. As we won't be going out again until we leave for the train, I thought you would like another drink."

"But Oslo," he said, "why Oslo? It's in the wrong—"

"Don't worry—you won't give anything away. I know we have to be north of Tromsø, only not exactly where. But Oslo—we are not going there. They are following, they heard me book the sleepers, they will be certain it is our destination. On the way there we can slip off the train and make for the place I have in mind."

"And that is—?"

"A little farm in the mountains near Lærdal. Ideal to lie up in for a few days."

If they were shadowed to the station, he did not notice it. It was only later on that the first contact was made. While they were

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standing outside their sleepers, smoking, talking in snatches about nothing that mattered, always watching the view unrolling before them, the squat man in a raincoat came down from the head of the train to pass them. As he pushed past, Heskin saw for a moment the little pig-eyes, felt the fan of tainted breath on his cheek. The man swayed on down the coach and out of sight.

Marianne leaned forward, her face against the window. " That's that," she said. " He's the one at the flat—and the hotel. I'm certain of it."

" What do we do—? "

" Wait."

The train rumbled on up the valley in the long summer twilight.

The corridor was empty now. The closed sleeper doors and the dim blue lamps stretched away in perspective to the shadows at the end. Beneath, the clack of the wheels went on in steady monotony. Heskin leaned against the window-rail, looking down towards the shadows. There was a lighter patch blending vaguely with them. Then the glow of a match being struck—the man was still there. Things always happened to Heskin on trains.

The guard had passed on his round when Heskin made the move. He slid over to the door of Marianne's sleeper, bending close to it in a pretence of listening; as he did so, he beat a faint tattoo on the panel. At once, the answer came from the other side. She was waiting.

He turned square towards the end of the coach, holding the window-rail with one hand as he made a quick, urgent gesture of summons with the other. The blur in the shadow took definite form as the man came forward a fraction into the light. Heskin repeated his movement; the other took one more step, then froze again, his arms hanging in front of him, loose and straight, like an ape's.

Suddenly, he seemed to make up his mind and came down the corridor in a shuffling run. They were close now: the little pig-eyes glinted, unwinking, and the smell of garlic made Heskin feel sick. He backed away another pace and waited. The two of them, alone in the creaking swaying corridor, the dim lights giving a feeling of being deep down under the sea.

A thick voice said, " Yessss . . . ? "

Heskin answered so softly that the other had to strain forward to hear. Over his shoulder a thin crack of light showed at the edge of Marianne's door.

" Graustein . . . Can I contact him . . . ? "

The other nodded, his eyes fixed on Heskin. Behind him, the band of light broadened as the door inched open.

" Tell him—I can't leave her—until I've got it—perhaps a week. Then I'll meet him at—"

The swish of air and the muffled *tokk* were almost instantaneous: the squat man grunted and slumped forward against Heskin. As he tried to push him off, Marianne's hands slid through from under

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the armpits. "Quick! Grab his feet. Back into my sleeper." As he bent to grope, he saw the wicked black cosh swinging from her wrist. It was a matter of four steps and then the door was wedged shut behind them. They heaved the sagging body on the bunk; the upturned eyes showed as white slits, and the breath came from the back of the throat in long, uneven rasps.

Marianne stood looking at him while her stockinged feet searched the floor for her shoes. "His hat," she said, "it's somewhere outside. Get it."

There was still no one in the corridor and when he came back with the hat, a grind of brakes and the slowing of the rhythm of the wheels told of an approaching station. "This is where we leave you, friend," said Marianne.

As they walked through the empty, echoing streets, she said suddenly: "We are going to stay with some relatives of mine—a farmer and his wife who live right out in the wilds. They are simple, decent country folk. They don't know a word of English —and couldn't begin to understand the sort of squalor we are wading in. They will take you at face value—and on my recommendation. So don't forget it."

He was very tired by the time they had roused a driver and bargained with him; it was heaven to climb into the back seat of the car and to have a thick rug tucked close about him. Soon they were running free of the town, down the twisting road into the quiet night, with nothing but the steady hum of the engine and the white stab of the headlights that fixed for a moment on the still, straight flanks of trees before tossing them back into the darkness.

When he got out of the car at her Uncle's farm, near Lærdal, he was rocking on his legs and hardly able to cope with or be surprised at the enthusiastic bout of handshaking. He was almost unaware of the bare, clean living-room, with the youngster—Cousin Ole—and the old lady in a rocking-chair, her face like a withered prune, who swayed and nodded without ceasing and never uttered a single word.

Over the bowl of broth, he concentrated on keeping his eyes open. The stream of language flowed on round his head; he was too tired to try to follow their dialect, to care what it was all about —to wonder at the quick sallies that came from the men and seemed to give Marianne amused embarrassment.

At last, relief came and she stood up. "Bed, Erik—and my Uncle apologizes that he cannot give us better quarters."

He smiled mechanically—and received a terrific slap on the back from Uncle, who was grinning from ear to ear. The son said something he could not quite hear that made them go into fits of laughter; the old lady rocked on, unheeding—and Marianne blushed.

Only that last unheard remark puzzled him as they climbed up the ladder and through the trapdoor. They were in the loft—long, deep-eaved, unpartitioned; smelling of raw pine-board and hay.

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As Marianne shouted down a last good-night and let the trap fall into place, his eyes travelled from the bare floor with the two mattresses side by side to her hands. He wondered in a dull, exhausted way why he had not noticed before—just when had she slipped that wedding-ring on the fourth finger of her right hand?

She broke the silence. "You put the idea in my head, Erik. You started it with our 'engagement.' You know that I dare not let you out of my sight—and when I thought of coming here, I knew that they were too simple—decent—to accept us any other way. So I said we were married."

He did not bother to answer.

She was kneeling by the lamp on the floor. "We'll undress in the dark, if you don't mind."

When she had blown it out, there was nothing but the rustle of clothes and then a dry, scraping sound. Her voice came softly from somewhere near the boards: "I've moved my bed . . . in case you have any ideas . . . about getting away . . . or anything else. I'm sleeping on top of the trapdoor."

He was so tired, but he could not sleep. He lay on the mattress, watching the shaft of moonlight that moved across the floor. It crept on, up the long, slim length of her body under the blanket until it glinted on her hair. Then on something else . . . a deeper, steadier gleam. Her cheek was pillowed on one hand, and under that showed the muzzle of an automatic.

He started to crawl towards it; easy to snatch before she woke up. Then he stopped. There was no point. Nowhere to go, no way out. He needed her—her goodwill, not her hate. He could understand why she despised him, even disliked him. But why did she hate him so?

When Heskin awoke in the morning, the loft was empty. Through the open trapdoor came the delicious smell of fresh coffee. He scrambled into his outer clothes, pulled a comb through his hair, and climbed down the ladder.

There was no one in the kitchen but the old woman bending over the great wood-fired stove, stirring something in a pot. She gave him that silent, creased smile and set on a corner of the table black bread and salt herrings, a bowl of sour junket, and coffee from a large copper pot. Throughout the silent breakfast, she kept on turning from her work to smile, once giving an all-knowing wink. When he had finished, he lit his pipe and went out of the house to look for Marianne.

She was sitting on the gate of the yard, whittling a stick with a clasp-knife. In shirt and slacks, without make-up, hair pulled back tight and tied with a ribbon, she looked like a tall slim boy. She looked up at his approach but did not stop her carving.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Erik. You were sleeping so soundly I didn't like to disturb you. Have you had breakfast?"

The morning was still and soft, with the scent of the first hay

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drifting up to them from where it hung in low brown hedges on the rails along the pasture. Below the fields, the head of the fiord glittered like a tongue of silver, with the grey and green of the mountain sweeping down from the high places to meet it.

" I've had something to eat, thanks. I want to talk to you."

She looked him up and down. " You need some more clothes—and a hair-cut. We'll walk down to Lærdal and get the bus back. We can talk then."

" No. Now." He avoided the violet eyes; nothing must distract from building the shell of indifference that would be the first step in getting even with her. The soft sound of the knife-blade against the wood went on without a pause while the long shavings scattered white on the ground between them.

" If you must ... ."

" It's this marriage business."

She stopped and squinted down at the point of her stick. " I'm surprised. I take it you have objections. Are they religious, or ethical? "

" Neither. I wouldn't give a damn—if there was the slightest feeling between us. But there isn't, which makes it all—" he made a movement of brushing something away—" somehow . . . indecent. You see, after what I've done, I can understand you despising me, resenting that we have to work together. But it goes deeper than that. There's hate."

She was still looking at her handiwork. " There's a point," she said. " Have you really thought about it? "

He stared at his feet. " Anyway, it's all unnecessary, this pretence. You won't be able to carry it through on the boat."

" I've told you it *is* necessary—for my peace of mind. And I've fixed the boat. One of the telephone calls in my flat was to the shipping company—changing our cabins to a double."

" *You* have a double cabin, you mean."

" I don't understand."

" I'm not coming, Marianne."

She threw the stick away, hard, overhand, so that it flew turning over in a long arc. " You will come—because for you, there is nothing else. I must keep you close and I've told you why; but your actual presence means just nothing to me, either way. If you are so squeamish—and I'm surprised—then I'll meet you. Take me to the British Consulate in the first port where there is time to make arrangements—and I'll marry you."

He looked at her, appalled. " Would you really do it—like that? "

She shut the clasp-knife with a click. " It shouldn't have to last long, anyway."

" Well, I won't even consider it."

Towards midnight, they were standing side by side at the stern rail of the ship, watching the white ribbon of wake uncoiling out into the gloom of the fiord. It was the eerie half-light of the long-

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dying day of northern summer; above, the evening star gleamed pale against the black tracery of mast and derrick, while to either beam there was nothing but the perpetual line of bow wave.

She leaned beside him with her arms on the rail, a cigarette between her lips and her face shadowed by the forward ruffle of her hair. For the last half-hour she had not said a word.

Heskin waited, sealed with bitterness, as he thought back over the day from the moment he had followed her up the gangway. The unpacking in the spotless cabin where, instead of being touched, he was infuriated by the bowl of flowers and the note of congratulation on their marriage from the Captain and crew. The meal in the Saloon, almost in silence, as he tried to weigh up the four passengers who evinced a well-bred but obvious curiosity. Then, the stroll round the ship that had brought them to this spot, that had taken them past the deck cargo—and the two crates stowed there, that he had never seen before, which bore his new name. And there was nothing he could do about any of it until she chose.

She spoke suddenly, without turning her head: "Still wish to go ashore, Erik?"

"Yes, after I've found out all I want to know."

"Such as?"

"You know damn well—what this is all about. Why we are here, and what happened before to make it necessary."

"And you don't know—any of it?"

"How many times have I got to say I know nothing?"

She had turned towards him, brushing back the lock of hair that had blown across her face; her eyes big and dark, and somehow luminous.

"As soon as you choose to talk, you can have my share. You know that."

She was silent for a moment. "But if we are going on playing this game—one day soon, when I'm in the mood, I'll tell you the beginning of a pretty story. It will be amusing to watch you while I am telling it."

She threw her cigarette out into the darkness; it curved down in an orange trail to die in the cream of the wake. He remembered the last time he had seen that happen: the harsh voice of the grey man saying, "They all go down—like that."

"You know my past—and all I have to fear," he said. "Your story can't worry me. All I want is to know it."

"Being afraid—and remembering—are not quite the same thing." She turned away. "I'm going below. Give me ten minutes."

He let the time drag out, leaning on the rail, staring out into the murk astern, turning the whole thing over and over . . . Let her talk, then; he was not going to. A last look at his watch, and he started towards the cabin.

Outside Number Four he stopped and raised his hand to knock. "Why the hell should I?" He jerked the handle and went straight in.

Marianne was standing in front of the mirror that hung between

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the two ports and above his bunk. Clad only in the bottom half of her pyjamas, she was dabbing cream on her face. In the second before she flashed round, two things fixed themselves in his mind. One, the dark red stain that spread up the back of her neck the moment she knew she was observed. The other was the look of her back. It was white, smooth, a perfect taper from the wide shoulders to the deep furrow at the base of her spine. Perfect . . . except for the marks.

They were of texture, not colour; across the space of the shoulder-blades was a row of vertical stripes where the skin seemed thinner, glistening, almost transparent. It looked as if she had been pressed back hard against a chair covered in glue.

" Din jaevel! " Her voice was rough. " Don't stare at me. How dare you! "

As she faced him, pressed against the bunk, he knew it was the violation of a secret, not modesty. She had made no attempt to cover her breasts.

" I'm sorry." In miserable silence, he turned towards the other wall and started to loosen his collar and tie. From behind him no answer but the rustle of clothes being folded and the creak of springs as she climbed into her bunk, then the click of the light switch as she snapped it out. He undressed and lay down.

The bunks were at right angles, feet together. From the open ports above him came the soft hush-hush of the sliding water, in the cabin only the creak of the ship and the feel of the engines; he lay on his side, staring out into the dark, trying to see her, but there was only the gleam of the pillow and the dark halo of hair spread out against it. Somehow he knew that she was watching him. " I'm sorry," he said again.

" I don't like anyone to see my back." Her voice was calm now, almost impersonal. " It was in the war—I was burnt on a steam radiator." Not " I burnt myself " but " I was burnt on; " the choice of words started a cold chill that increased with every sentence as the quiet monotone continued.

" You may not know what happened, so I will tell you—and we need not mention it again. It was at Narvik, during the occupation. They thought I knew something that they wanted, so I was taken down to the S.S. Headquarters. As you know, it was only they—and the Quislings—who did the dirty work. To help me talk, they stripped me and strapped my back against a radiator."

He had to say something: " Did you know what they wanted? "

" Of course."

" And—? "

" No." There was infinite scorn there. " You can look at me and it will mean nothing, because you are nothing to me. Except at my back; that is different."

He heard her turn over in the bunk. " Good night, Erik."

So the pattern of those days began. After, he could remember

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only the theme of sunlight dappled on still water, its softening of the snow-tipped mountains sliding steeply down, crowding closer and closer to the ship as each narrow strait spent itself in its assault against the land.

The other passengers were pleasant, friendly, but phantom; the Professor, a little button of a man with his fluent English, bad jokes, and unchanging garb of shorts, shirt, and coloured woolly cap with its large bobble bouncing behind; his blonde wife, always smiling; the young couple from Bergen, always holding hands: none seemed real to Heskin. He was on the inside, looking out.

One morning, as they were leaning on the rail, the Professor said suddenly, "It is so nice, to see someone like your wife finding happiness at last."

"I beg your pardon?"

But the old man was too deep in his theme to notice. "You see, my friend, I, too, was in the Resistance. They even found use for poor weedy scholars. But I lacked one thing for such a business, Herr Bergman. And that was courage—physical courage. When I heard one night that they were coming to question me, I knew I could not go through with it. It did not matter that I would betray *myself* through pain; it was that I would betray the *others*. The Swedish border was only ten miles away. I went over that night and there was no betrayal."

"But my wife, Professor. You were saying—?"

"Ah yes. You must understand that Norway is a very small place—in population. In the Resistance, most of us knew each other through our code names. Though we had never met before and though she lived far to the north, I knew through an old student of a Marianne Rassmussen of Tromsø—and her husband. It was—"

"But it couldn't be!"

"But surely—"

The old man fell silent. Then, he added, "I may be wrong; it is so long ago. Rassmussen is a common name in the north. Of course, it may not have been your wife."

"Tell me about the Rassmussens you knew of."

The Professor shook his head. "It is better not, my friend. It is just one of those stories that are the same after this war. You, from safe England, would not quite believe it and the telling would pain me. Let it lie."

From the boat deck, Heskin began to be aware of the activity that was taking place in the base of the ship's funnel. This was a dummy, housing water-tanks and below them a radio cabin, unused in coastal waters. Now there was a thumping and a scuffling, and as they passed, a duster was shot through the open port to be shaken with vigour.

"What's going on?" asked Heskin.

"Perhaps we shall have company," the Professor said. "The stewardess told my wife that three passengers may join us at Narvik. The berths are full, so there is nowhere else to put them."

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On the foredeck next day, Marianne and he were sunbathing while the ship made a diversion so that they could see the black ice cliff of the glacier Svartisen grind and crash into the waters of the fiord.

Away from everyone, up in the small, angled space formed by the winged plates that topped the ship's stem, they lay quiet, while the hot sun pressed them down. Aft, the view showed only the deserted deck and the stack of cargo, backed by the white wall of the bridge; behind them, there was nothing but the waste of water. They were apart from the world, physically close, but remote as strangers from each other.

The silence became unbearable; he turned back to Marianne, watching the sunlight fleck the hairs on calf and thigh below her shorts. "What's in those cases with my name on?" he asked.

"Some of the things you wrote and told me to get," she answered drowsily.

It was like butting his head against a brick wall at every turn; he wanted to break the calm—to worry her.

"Do you know that we may have three new passengers joining the ship at Narvik?" he said.

She sat up quickly. "How—who told you?"

"The stewardess told the Professor's wife—and he told me. They are getting the radio cabin ready, as there is no room elsewhere."

There was a long silence.

"Of course"—and her voice was very bitter—"of course, we have been wasting our time. Narvik is the logical—the only place—to wait. Norway is only four miles broad there, and the railway to the north comes in from Sweden. All the planes and boats stop, and there is only a ferry across the fiord. It is the throat of the net. I might have known."

"But why pick on this ship?"

She shrugged. "Someone must have picked up the trail on our way here. They have got us now."

"Don't you think you had better start to trust me?" Heskin said quietly.

"No. But I think I shall tell you that story of mine. If you can take it."

"I've told you there's nothing to take."

"I shall be watching you. Please don't interrupt."

She stiffened, clasping her arms round her drawn-up knees.

"I shall start with a date—April, 1945—and two names, Dolmann and Hofer." So they had come in at last, those names he had seen in the notebook and the cuttings from Bergman's briefcase. Marianne's voice went on without a break, ". . . They were Germans, or rather, Dolmann was, but Hofer was Austrian. He was an important person, a Gauleiter, and a personal friend of Hitler's. At this time—three weeks before the final German collapse—Dolmann was important too. He was darting to and fro from Austria to Italy and Switzerland, trying to make terms for

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the surrender of the Axis armies in Italy. When he got back to Innsbrück from one of these trips, he found his friend Hofer holding a load of dynamite.

"A special train had arrived there, consigned to Hofer personally and in great secrecy by Hitler. There were twenty-four chests on that train. Twenty of them contained the Führer's loot—gold cigarette-cases, pearls, necklaces of jewels—"

"And Hitler, Eva Braun, and Bormann were stuffed into the others, I suppose?" He was almost angry; it was that old, old story trotting out again.

Her voice was cold as she silenced the interruption: "This is not a joke; it happens to be true. Don't you want me to go on?"

"Please do."

"The other four chests contained nothing more exciting than documents—except that the subject-matter made them of unusual interest. They were a collection of Hitler's secret papers that give both sides of German-Russian relations during the uneasy alliance of 1939-1941. It's all there: all the bargaining—the rest of the free world is carved up between them and offered to each other as counters in their own sweet game of double-cross. Dolmann checked some of it. He said that Britain would be enlightened to read how far things might have gone at their expense to guarantee Russian immunity."

Heskin sat up; this was a new twist. He remembered the names on the newspaper cuttings and what the real Bergman had said in the carriage: *Something if sold to the right people . . . make you rich for life.* It would indeed.

"How do you know this?"

"Dolmann told me."

"Where is he now?"

"Stateless—in hiding. He daren't come out because of his war record. But we'll come back to him later."

"The orders to Hofer were that the chests must be hidden with absolute safety and secrecy. The treasure was dealt with first. Dolmann did that job in between his surrender trips. They are somewhere in the Alps, and of course, the minute he dares, he will try to collect them. But when he returned to Innsbrück for the last time, he found the papers had gone."

"Where?"

"Back north. Hitler's orders had been countermanded and they had been taken away by a Captain Jodl of the German Navy."

"What happened then?"

"A day later three ocean-going U-boats left Lübeck to try to make a desperate run out of the Baltic, up the Kattegat and round the Orkneys to the Atlantic—perhaps to South America. Hitler wanted his gambling counters as far away as possible.

"Some people say that Hitler himself was in one of the U-boats; at any rate, the fleet met disaster in the Sound off Copenhagen. The R.A.F. caught them in shallow water and bombed them. Two boats were sunk, while the third—Captain Jodl's—was crippled.

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Extra fuel-tanks and stores of food were of no use to him, for, though still afloat, he could not submerge, and on the surface could make only four knots."

"Had he still got the chests?"

"He still had the chests. He radioed the Berlin Chancellery for fresh orders, saying that he could not attempt the ocean voyage, and the reply he got passed the baby straight back to him. He was to be held personally responsible to his Führer for the safe hiding of the papers as far north up the Norwegian coast as he could get his ship; after that he was to scuttle her and disperse his crew to await internment. They knew the game was up then, that it was only a matter of days. Someone would contact him later as to the location of the papers, when the shouting had died down."

He was listening now, absorbed; piece by piece, the few fragments were falling into the framework of the story.

"And then?"

"Captain Jodl was a hundred-per-cent Nazi—to him Hitler was God, and he would carry out the order he had been given, whatever the cost. He attempted to make a landfall north of Bodø on the Vest Fjord, opposite the Lofoten Islands, but when he sailed in there, he got a nasty shock: having limped that far, moving by night, lying up each day in some inlet under camouflage, fearful of attack by the Resistance or being spotted by Allied planes, he found that no one in Bodø would have anything to do with him."

"But the Germans were still in control—the war hadn't finished."

"No, but some odd things were going on in North Norway in those last upside-down days; the Underground were coming into the open, the Russian prisoners were breaking out of their camps, eager for loot and revenge. On top of this, besides having to protect themselves, the German Army were arguing whether to fight on alone or surrender when Berlin fell. Jodl dared not reveal his mission; no one had any time for him and his crippled U-boat."

"Go on."

He was hugging his arms round his knees now.

"Bodø, Harstad, Tromsø, it was the same at each port. To make things more difficult, for each degree he crept northward, the Arctic summer night dwindled, becoming shorter and shorter, until he had to move in the light. Then the Resistance got him; they radioed his course back to England, and north of Tromsø—he was making a desperate last try for Alta, the place that had been the base for the *Tirpitz*—a Sunderland flying-boat pinned him down. Jodl didn't wait for the attack; he beached his ship. The crew were bombed and machine-gunned, some killed, but he and a few others managed to get ashore."

"With the papers?"

"No, he hadn't time. But he knew they were safe, for the U-boat was aground. More than anything, he needed the help of local knowledge: a place to hide his cargo. They landed at the sea end of a fiord where there was a Nazi concentration camp; one of the largest, and worst, in all Norway.

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" Jodl contacted the Camp Commandant and told him as much of his story as he dared—for I do not think he trusted the man. They agreed to remove the papers at once, then hold them in the camp till they had decided what to do.

" They went back by launch and could not have chosen a worse moment: a second Sunderland, sent to make sure the job had been well done, swooped on them as they were making their last trip back to the shore. They were machine-gunned and bombed again. Captain Jodl and his crew were killed outright, and the Camp Commandant slightly wounded."

There was silence for a moment. He stared up at the gulls, poised without effort as they swooped in and out amongst the rigging; then down at his side at the streaming water, bluer now, almost milky, as the salt fiord met the ice from the glacier-head. Behind him the flat snowcap of Svartisen gleamed, and there came the far-off rumble of the ice cliff crumbling down into the sea.

" The Commandant," she said suddenly, " he was—Oh well, it doesn't matter."

" What was he? "

Not once during all this had she taken her eyes off him, but when he turned back now, the burning intensity behind that stare was frightening. " If I say that he was the worst type of S.S.—I think *you* will understand what I mean."

" Only what I have read—but go on."

" The point is that he was not the same type as Jodl. He had not the blind loyalty to the Führer, nor direct personal orders from him. Above all, he knew how nearly the war was over, and that memories would be long. He saw in these papers safety—the personal bargaining counter for things that he had done. He decided to hide the documents and disappear until he saw which way it was safe to jump."

" Why didn't he take the papers with him when he went? "

" For one thing, they were too heavy and bulky, sealed in watertight containers; and how could he bargain with something that they would then possess? "

" Where did he hide them, then? "

" *You know.*"

His eyes fell away from hers; of all the things she had half said and hinted, this was the only one that was true. *Nordkapp . . . under the Hornets' Nest* . . . She knew that he knew—but not how little.

" Please finish," he said abruptly.

" He didn't have the strength or local knowledge to hide them alone and he didn't trust his own kind; he wanted outside help and he picked it in his own camp—a Norwegian who had been held as a hostage, treated abominably."

Little cracks were beginning to appear in the smooth fabric of her story; the sentences jerked, there were pauses, her voice grew tight. For the first time she was not watching him, but turned away, staring out over the fiord.

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"The Commandant saw this—this man—who knew that coast like the back of his hand, and offered the man his freedom in exchange for a safe hiding-place. The Norwegian agreed."

"But—?"

"I know—I have often wondered about those 'buts.' First, if the end was so close, why didn't he tell the Commandant to go to hell, and stick it out? Then, how could he trust for a moment a man's word that he knew to be worthless, or hope that he would be granted his freedom at all. He must have known that he would never be allowed to get away with the secret.

"I think it turned on this. You and I, we have not been shut in, starved, overworked for years, so we cannot judge what even the phantom of freedom would do to our thinking. And, though he must have known that things were bad for the Germans, he could not have guessed how near deliverance was. I think he knew they would not let him go—that he agreed only in order to get outside the camp and make a break for it."

"You knew him?"

"Yes, I knew him—well."

There was a silence. "Anyway, the Norwegian agreed; the three set off from the camp in a fishing-boat."

"The three—?" But again she did not seem to hear.

"I think the proof of his distrust was that he left hidden behind him in the camp a map of where he was going—in case. It was only a rough sketch—and it gave no clue to the whereabouts of the hiding-place. I suppose he himself knew so well that it did not occur to him others might not. I have that plan—but I don't know where the place is."

"How did you get hold of it?"

"I told you, he was a friend of mine. Afterwards, other friends smuggled it out to me with—other things."

"What happened?" He was talking mechanically now, while just one thought grew to fill his whole mind; already he was looking down the long, dark tunnel to the inevitable conclusion of this and the other story. But the questions had to go on.

"Only two came back from that trip—and my friend was not one of them. A week later came the capitulation, and the Commandant walked out of his camp; he broke east—the wrong way. Six hours after the Russians caught him, he was put up against a wall. The third man disappeared."

He had to force the last question through his teeth.

"Who was the third man?"

She said something in Norwegian, very softly. Then louder, in a tight, high voice: "It's getting very cold—we must be right on the glacier. Would you get a sweater for me from the cabin?"

He scrambled to his feet; as he turned away, his eyes caught the flash of something that fell from her hidden face to her forearm, then rolled on downwards in a shining, uneven trail. There was another . . . then a third.

Very quietly, he walked away down the foredeck.

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In the cabin it was clean and light and intimate. Through the open ports the water was sliding by so fast and close, throwing back long ripples of light on the deck-head, white above him. He went straight to the drawers of the dressing-table and started a search for the sweater. His hands moved slowly, gently, letting the smooth silk froth of her underclothes slide between his fingers, in the lingering contact of something close and personal.

At last he found it and made a few uncertain steps back towards the door. It was one of the moments that could never come again; a glimpse of something that would never be. He stopped at the head of her bunk and bent down quickly to press his cheek against the pillow; there, like a symbol, was the faint, elusive echo of the fragrance of her hair.

He knew that Bergman had been the third man; he could see so clearly down the dark corridor of time to the final disaster. But there was no escape now, only a faint hope that she might believe. The story would have to unwind to its inevitable end—because he loved Marianne.

Quietly, he closed the door behind him.

Late at night, as they crept up the last narrow thread of the Vest Fjord towards Narvik, they were on the bridge again, watching the blue-grey of the mountains fold down close to the white town, and the straight clusters of masts sheltering behind the quay. Heskin was peering through a pair of glasses. Suddenly, the tips of Marianne's fingers were biting into his arm.

"The throat of the net, Erik," she said.

Seen through the glasses, standing out like a cardboard figure, the grey man looked far taller than in reality, as he watched the *Mercur* come into dock. Perhaps it was the head-and-shoulder advantage he had over the other figure that stood at his side. Heskin saw the arms rise, a flash of light, and then had the queer sensation of looking directly into another pair of binoculars.

"We've got to carry it off," she said. "Wave."

Marianne's voice rang clear across the gap. "Herr Graustein—how nice!"

Graustein swept off his hat with a flourish.

"Frøken," he called to her, "the surprise and pleasure are mine entirely. I had no idea—"

Heskin could hardly believe Marianne's gay laugh as she leaned over the wing of the bridge, looking down at Graustein, nor her tone when she spoke, a perfect balance of naïvety and pride.

"Not Frøken any more, Herr Graustein. I am Fru Bergman now. This has become our honeymoon."

Heskin stared at her in grudging admiration.

The gangway was in place, and two men came behind Graustein as he led the way up to the deck. Both were short and square, and one, Heskin saw, was their friend of the train. He smiled as he watched Marianne go forward to be the first in greeting, then observed the only crack in the façade of her dewy-eyed welcome:

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her instinctive recoil as the leader bent over her, the effort to withdraw her hand as it lay engulfed in that square black-backed fist.

In two strides, Graustein was across the boat deck, peering through the door of the room in the base of the funnel. "These are our quarters? Capital!" He beckoned to the two men behind him, and broke into a series of halting sentences. They picked up the bags and went in.

Graustein turned to Erik and Marianne. "They are two Finnish colleagues of mine," he said, "and have practically no English. It is a pity you do not speak Finnish. Or do you, by any chance?" Both shook their heads.

"I was telling them of your situation," he went on smoothly, "and saying that in these close confines we must do our best," he groped for the phrase, "not to play the gooseberry."

Again there was that bleak smile and the wide sweep of the hat. "Now I must pay my respects to the Captain." He turned on his heel and went forward to the bridge.

Heskin leaned his elbows on the rail. "What do we do now—get off the ship?"

"And have them follow? No, we must hang on and think. I told a lie just now. I speak Finnish fairly well. It was not Finnish he was speaking to those men, Erik. It was Russian."

"So what?"

"Who held that Commandant of the German concentration camp? And how much did he tell—was he made to tell—before they shot him?"

At each meeting with Graustein came mounting tension, the searching of each pleasantry for a hidden meaning, the sudden relief when he left.

Once, when he was between them, the great hands spread out on the rail, Heskin watched Marianne stiffen and edge away. Later, she said, "Those hands—they make me feel sick. I dream about having them touch me. There must be some way of escape."

On the last night before Tromsø, the Captain came over to Heskin, alone on the bridge. "Do you see the narrows ahead, Herr Bergman?" He pointed to where the cliffs of Bystraumen closed to a thin vertical cut. "It is a feature of this country that where the mountains are steep and the fiord narrow, there always is the very deep water. As we pass through, I'm going to put on the echo-sounder. If you would like to watch, come down to the chart-room."

It was a small room below the bridge, almost entirely filled by a table strewn with the current-chart, ruler, and dividers. Round the walls were racks with rolls of other charts sticking from pigeon-holes; in one corner was a grey metal box that looked like a wireless set.

The Captain turned to the chart. "Look, in the narrows according to these markings there is no bottom; they could not reach it with a line and lead. Now we shall see what our machine says." He turned

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another switch and a strip of paper started to unwind while a jerking arm stabbed a wavy line across it. It started to dip, crossing a line marked 500. "Over a thousand feet," said the Captain. "Now watch."

He pointed through the porthole at the grey wall of cliff closing in as if to squeeze them. Almost at once, the pointer started to fall in great jerks: 1000, 1500, then right off the paper. The Captain smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Too deep, even for us," he said.

Heskin looked round the stacks of charts. "Do you have every sheet for the whole coast here? Can I look at Nordkapp?"

The Captain reached up to a rack and then spread a sheet out on the table. "There you are, Herr Bergman—Europe's northernmost land, great Nordkapp, a thousand feet high."

To a landsman it looked as disappointing as all charts; the emphasis on the minute detail of the flat, dull sea, and the blank disregard for any land except for some mark on the coast.

The Captain's stubby forefinger ran round the coastline. "You see, it is on an island. Nordkyn, the other north point, is away beyond the two great fiords on the mainland. But Nordkapp is the most wonderful sight, Herr Bergman—a great cliff falling straight into the sea."

"Shall we see it?"

"Not on the outward voyage, I'm afraid—we pass through the channel to the south of the island. On the return, yes. But if you really want to see well, take a small boat from Kjelvik where we call, and land at Hornvika where there are steps cut to the top of the cliff. It is a stiff climb, but it finishes on the very edge and the view is wonderful."

Heskin hardly heard anything after that . . . Hornvika. It was as annoying as a single phrase from a forgotten melody. He knew he had heard the name before.

"Hornvika?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes—the bay of the Horn. Look." The Captain pulled down the chart until they could see the top margin; there, as an aid to mariners, was engraved a row of silhouettes of landmarks. One was a great column of rock that sprouted from the cliff-fall, like the horn of a rhinoceros.

"A famous landmark." He pulled the chart back and pointed. "There. With Hornvika behind and Hornsness—the point of the Horn—beside it."

Hornsness . . . Hornets' Nest. Perhaps poor dying Bergman had stumbled over the word, perhaps he himself had misheard. But he had it all now.

Mechanically, he pointed at something else on the chart; it happened to be a small black dot on the blank landscape at the tip of the cape. "What's that?"

The Captain laughed. "Another landmark—rather a surprising one to find in such a place. It is a tea-house, that was used a lot by tourists before the war . . ."

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As the answer trailed off, he saw the Captain's eyes lift towards the door. At the same instant he was aware of the smell of a cigar. The grey man was leaning against the door jamb, filling its length.

"So we are helping the Captain to plot our journey to the far north, Herr Bergman?" It sounded like a joke—would be taken as a joke by anyone—unless they knew.

In the early hours of the morning, Heskin lay staring at the deckhead, listening to the ringing of the telegraph and the change of beat of the engines as the *Mercur* was brought into the quay at Tromsø. Then there was a soft shock as the ship came to rest, the creak of the piles taking the strain.

Tromsø was out there; the broad wooden jetty, then the wooden houses in the narrow, twisting streets running up the hill.

"I want to have a look at this place," said Heskin. "It should be very interesting."

"You're crazy!" She stood quite still, her slip hanging loose halfway down her arms. For the first time he saw a look of uncertainty, a bewilderment come into her eyes.

Then she flushed and her voice went hard: "*You* go into *Tromsø*? Has your conceit—or your greed—gone to your head? 'I have been thinking about the third man,'" she mimicked. "You admit you know—then how long do you think you would last on the streets of Tromsø without being recognized—and what would happen after that? It will be safer for you here, below decks. You had better acquire a feverish cold, and lie low. I still have need of you: that is the only reason I care."

He wanted to shout at Marianne, to shake her into the conviction that there was no reason why he should not walk the streets of the town without harm. But deep down he knew—her anxiety that he should not go only made it more certain—that what she believed was right. Something terrible waited for him in Tromsø.

Marianne saw the stewardess, and breakfast was sent on a tray to the cabin. After they had finished, she tidied his bunk and propped up the pillows behind him.

"There," she said, "you look like an invalid. You have a feverish cold, by the way." She went to the door and took her coat from the hook. "I have to go into the town. I shan't be long. Don't move from here."

He picked up a book but there were too many other things to let him concentrate. The sight of the slow rise and fall of the wharf timbers framed in the square of the open port, the smell of salt seaweed, and the suck of the tide against the piles. There was something else, too. A sound that irritated. A regular faint scrape that sounded like metal on glass. But he felt too lazy to get up and investigate.

An hour passed. Then there was a knock on the door. Probably the stewardess coming for the tray. "Come in."

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The door opened and closed. He looked up from his book to see Graustein standing there, with a small suitcase in his hand.

"Ah, Herr Bergman. I was sorry to hear you were indisposed. A pity, because I wish to talk to you. So I took the liberty of coming down here. But your wife—?"

"She's gone into the town."

"Will she be long?"

"I don't think so."

"Then I will wait."

He moved some clothes from the back of a chair and sat down, balancing the case on his knees.

"Perhaps," he said, "it might be better if we were to talk of this alone."

Heskin stared at him. "If there is anything to discuss, it will have to be in front of my wife."

"I see." There was silence but for the tattoo the great hairy fingers were drumming on the suitcase lid.

It was a relief when the door jerked open and Marianne came in.

"Mr. Graustein wants to talk to us, Marianne." He looked hard at her. "I refused to discuss *anything* until you got back."

Graustein had not risen. Marianne brushed past him and stood leaning against the edge of the dressing-table.

"So you want to talk to us, Herr Graustein? Good. But before you start, I want to say something. One of those Finnish friends of yours is lying on the boat deck, in a sleeping-bag, right across the gangway to this cabin. He would not move to let me by; I had to step right over him. Will you speak to him, or shall I see the Captain?"

There was that bleak smile. "I apologize, Fru Bergman. I will speak to him. He is hardy—likes sleeping outside. He does not understand."

"Thank you. Now we are listening."

He stirred in his chair. "Let us cut all this pretence and come to the point. I am a business man. I know what you have and I want to buy it. But—"

"What exactly is it we have?"

There was a pained look on his face as he turned to the questioner. "Fru Bergman—you *know* that I know. But, if you insist on details, the knowledge of the location of"—the big hands spread out in a gesture of the bazaar—"written treachery, between nations. And—you may not even know this—some scientific data that might shorten certain investigations by two years. The Germans had got further than fooling around with heavy water at Rjukan."

There was a long silence. Marianne had turned to the mirror and was powdering her nose; then she opened one of the small drawers of the dressing-table, feeling in it as if for a handkerchief. Heskin, hunched up in the bunk, was thinking, "That was the place where the Commandos made a raid on an atomic plant. So there's that as well. But Marianne never mentioned it."

The harsh voice cut in again: "I am telling you this so that

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you will understand the thing is too big—you cannot handle it. But I can. So—" There was a click as his fingers slipped the catches of the suitcase.

Marianne whipped round. In her hand, the Colt .32—the one he had seen once before in the loft at Lærdal in the moonlight—was small but very steady as she levelled it on their guest.

" Stop that. You, Graustein, put your hands up. Above your head. Erik, tip that case on the floor. There's a gun inside."

The grey man hardly moved. He did not raise his hands, but let them fall limp to his sides. As Heskin scrambled from the bunk, he said, " I came to buy. There is no gun."

" Tip it over, Erik."

There was no heavy thud of a weapon hitting the floor: only the softer sound of packet after packet of ochre kroner notes falling to the carpet.

" You see," said Graustein, " if you think about it—there could be no gun. I am interested in you only while alive and talking. And you, Fru Bergman, please put that down. There might be an accident—and the police would come. You know you would not like that."

Marianne put the gun down on the table. " Well? " she said.

The grey man bent forward and took one of the bundles. He held it up between the claw of finger and thumb.

" There is here "—his eyes flicked for a second to the notes in his hand—" two thousand kroner. On the floor you will find twenty-nine similar packets. It is all good money—verify that if you wish—sixty thousand in all." He slipped off the chair to the floor, righting the suitcase and dropping the packets in slowly, one by one, as if to emphasize his next words.

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For a long time no one spoke. Then Marianne's voice came, tight and harsh: " A hundred and twenty thousand? We want more than that, Graustein."

He spread his hands again. " I should explain. I am not an agent in this matter—offering other people's money. I am the principal—and until I have completed the deal with my other customer, my resources are limited. This is the most I can manage."

" Who is the other customer? "

Again that smile. " That disclosure, Fru Bergman, would hardly be ethical."

For the first time she turned to look at Heskin. " What do you think? "

" We should have time to consider."

The grey man stood up. " That is reasonable." He picked up the case and walked to the door, then turned to face them. " I understand the ship sails tomorrow at nine. I must know before

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that. I shall come for your answer at seven. In the meantime, I shall see you are left in peace—unless, of course, you have any stupid ideas. I hope you will accept my offer, because, if not—"

"If not?" Marianne said softly.

"It will be war."

As he lingered over the words, his free hand came up as if to straighten his tie. Then it was so quick that there was just a blur of movement before the big Luger was pointing, rock steady, at them. He stood like that, smiling gently, for a moment before he slid the gun back into its shoulder holster.

"And if it is war, Fru Bergman, I should advise you to avoid gun-play." A quick bow. "Until seven tomorrow, then."

The door closed gently behind him.

"Well?" She slid the Colt into the drawer and closed it.

"Six thousand pounds. It's a lot of money."

"Pounds or kroner, it's not enough. If he offers that—what do you think they are really worth?"

"You mean us to go on, then."

"Of course. Unless he thinks in very different terms. I have my own reasons for wanting those papers."

"But how can we get away?"

"I don't know—yet."

Cooped in the cabin all that day, with Marianne silent and preoccupied, there was nothing to do but think. He sat on the bunk or paced the cabin, turning it all over and over in his mind. Tromsø—and the unknown but terribly real danger that lurked so close beyond the bounds of the ship . . . Graustein . . . far above these, Marianne.

It was always light so time did not matter. There was no mention of a plan when at eight she said it would be better to sleep now and wake early. He lay there, listening to her steady breath, marking the passing hours by the sound of the ship's bell. Just after midnight, he knew he could stand it no longer.

He slipped into his clothes and put on the money-belt. Then, with his shoes in one hand, he crept across to the drawer that held the gun. As he eased it open, her voice came from behind him.

"Going for a walk, Erik?"

He turned square to face her. She had propped herself on one elbow, and he followed the soft curve of her breast, shadowed under the neck of her nightdress, with a wave of bitter-sweet tenderness.

"Yes. I'm going—for good. I can't stand it."

"The streets of Tromsø are pretty empty at this time—except for the police," she said. "I think your chances of escaping notice would be even less than during the day."

"I'll risk that. I can't go on like this. You know how I feel about you."

There was a long silence. "If you did get away," she said, "what then?"

"I don't know—except to be free of it all—for ever."

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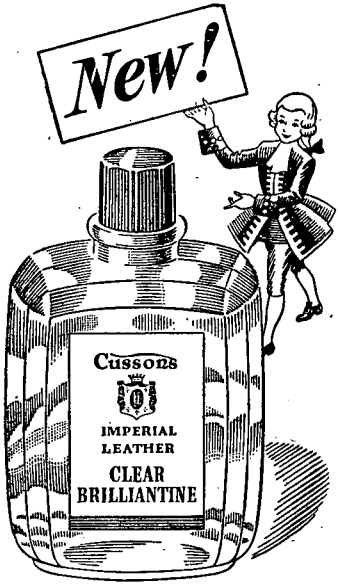

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"You'll never be free of it." She stopped, and then a match flared, and after that nothing for a long time but the glow of her cigarette in the green gloom of the cabin.

At last she spoke, very slowly and carefully: "If—I get you out of here, will you play square with me?"

"Of course."

"All right." She swung her legs out of the bunk and started dressing in slacks, shirt, and sweater. All the time she talked to him in jerking sentences. "I think I can fix it—but I'll have to go on first and prepare the way. I don't know how long I'll be—at least an hour. While you're waiting, get the essentials together, just what you can carry. We'll have to leave the rest." Then she looked at the money-belt. "How much is there left?"

"About eight thousand kroner."

She shrugged. "It will have to do." Then she gave a last tug at her sweater and pushed back her hair. "Now I'm going. Watch out for me as I come back."

"But how will you manage it? I mean, Graustein and his friends —there's always one on watch."

"Had you thought of that one—when you decided to make your exit, Erik? No, there are more ways out of this ship than down the gangway. Give me a hand up."

She knelt on his bunk and very softly pulled the curtain back from the port. Outside, the piles of the jetty were only two feet away, heaving gently on the swell.

"I'm going out feet first," she said. "Steady me under the arms until I get a foothold."

The port was square, almost like a window, and there was plenty of room for her to wriggle out and turn over to face him. As he steadied her, he could feel the soft warmth of her arms through the shirt, and the fragrance of her hair was very close to his face.

For a moment she stayed framed in the square of the port. "I shan't be long."

"Where are we going?"

"To friends."

Then, for the first time, she touched him deliberately: she slipped one hand from the sill of the port and caught his in a quick squeeze. Swinging backwards, she caught hold of one of the upright piles and vanished into the darkness, silent as a bat, jumping from cross-brace to cross-brace.

Marianne came back out of the darkness like some darting will-o'-the-wisp. She stopped well within the shadow and beckoned. He managed to get his legs through the porthole and turn round, scraping down the plates of the ship as he took the weight on his arms. A hand came out from behind to catch his ankle and guide it back to rest on the timber; a heave on his coat and he was standing beside her. "Come on," she breathed.

The jetty seemed to have been repaired and extended so much that there was hardly a place where they could not move level on

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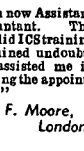

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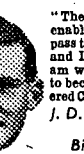

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the supporting timbers. Half dark, with the cracks of light that came through the upper planking reflected in flashes on the black, sucking water below; it was cool, salty, with the tang of seaweed. Their feet rasped on barnacles. When they stopped once for a rest, he whispered, "How did you know this way?"

She answered as softly, "We learnt in the Occupation. We used to come in underneath here in the dark and cut up through the planking under the German stacks of flour and sugar—suck out the contents of the bottom sacks. It meant shooting if we were caught—but we were starving."

As they moved on, he could hear a new sound, the sharp hiss of the sea's edge, and glimpsed the reflection of light from the planking of small boats moored in the basin.

Marianne stopped again. "Give me two hundred kroner. There will be a boat waiting directly opposite where we come out. Get in quick and lie in the bottom. And—try not to let the man have too good a look at your face."

A white launch was there, with a tall, bald man in dungarees sitting in the stern, smoking a pipe. He did not look in their direction when she whistled, but started to crank the engine. In seconds, they had scrambled over the two boats moored between, and dived for the bottom boards of the launch. Heskin felt the throb of the motor quicken.

No one spoke until the boat started to heel as she turned to starboard; then Marianne looked back and asked a question Heskin could not hear. The man at the tiller gave a searching look behind him before answering in a monosyllable.

"You can sit up," said Marianne, "there's no one watching from the *Mercur*."

They were moving fast to the south over the long swells outside the jetties. To landward, the ramble of the town backed onto the low hump of the island. Then the bows turned in towards a pier and the man at the tiller cut his engine. When he passed Marianne on his way to the bows to fend off, the wad of notes changed hands in silence.

As they touched the pier-head, he jumped ashore, giving a kick with one leg to push the bows out. Then he walked away without once looking back.

"And what does he think we are doing?" The note of the engine had picked up and they were heading out to the open fiord.

Marianne leaned back on the tiller. "Eloping. And in Troms they are romantic—and mind their own business."

The town thinned out to nothing on their beam: the island dwindled to a low strip of land clumped with stunted birch, and then there was the sweep of open water, with the hulk of the *Tirpitz* showing far off as a dirty brown stain against the backcloth of the mountains. The bows swung round and pointed directly towards it.

They moved on steadily, and the red bulk had doubled in size before he realized the purpose of their course.

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"What on earth are we going there for? I thought you said something about friends."

"We are—but we can't arrive in the middle of the night. They're a funny, suspicious lot. We have a good deal of time to waste."

"Why waste it at a wreck?" Now that the strain of escape had passed, he felt nothing but a vague irritation. There were the beginnings of a headache, too.

"Because I have never been—and always wanted to go. Because it is the last place they would think of looking for us."

The sun was behind the far mountains on its circle of the horizon before the rise of another day. There was a steady cold breeze blowing towards them, and Heskin shivered as he pulled his jacket close. The sea was jagged but silky, reflecting in its blackness the orange flecks of the northern glow.

As they ran close to circle the capsized ship, he saw for the first time how vast she was. Seven hundred feet must be the run of the keel from knife bows through barrel midships to the tapering stern where the propellerless tail-shafts stuck out like guns. Tilted to one side, streaked and stained, an oily murk tinging the water that sucked and sighed from her bowels. There was no triumph in the sight . . . only sadness. It was the vast, rotting carcass of a once-proud animal.

They moored to the flat pontoon that was against the far side. Marianne picked up a sack that had been lying on the bottom boards of their launch.

"This was the best they could do at short notice. But I think there will be most of the things we want. Come on."

He looked up the smooth, steep slope, with the zig-zag pattern of holes, each large enough to take a boot, that were cut through the plating one above the other, ending in a square black hole some thirty feet above them. He could see its jagged edges, the lumps of run metal where the acetylene cutters had made their desperate fight to pierce the hull.

"You're not going inside there?"

She looked up from untying the sack. "Of course. Why not?"

"But what's the point, Marianne? If we must wait before going on, isn't there some other place?"

"Frightened?"

"No, but it will be cold, smelly, dirty—and, I should think, dangerous."

She started to hum softly under her breath as she emptied the contents of the sack. She separated two large torches, a ball of string, and a length of rope; wound the rope round her waist, and tied the swivel of one torch to her belt with some of the string.

Then she stopped humming and held out the other flashlight.

"Tie it on like mine—in case you drop it. You go first."

It was an easy climb to the large hole. He peered into the blackness of it and the smell of fuel oil fanned out from within. Then he looked down at her, waiting a few footholds below.

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" You had better go up on the keel first and see if there is anyone about," she said, " I'll wait here."

As the slope became easier, the footholds stopped. It was like walking up a smooth brown hill until he reached the flat summit of the keel amidships. All around, the pale sea was coming to life as the yellow disk of the sun began its upward climb from behind the shelter of the hills: the waste of water was empty but for the smudge of one fishing-boat working round the point of Tromsø island: the cold wind was still blowing off the land.

Escape? . . . He looked all round where the plates went down into the water. Too steep. Only by the rudder at the stern might it be possible, and then it was the hell of a long swim to shore. He turned and climbed down to where Marianne was waiting.

" All right? " she said.

" Yes."

" You go first. And remember, everything will be very slippery and upside-down."

At its beginning, the tunnel had been cut through the double bottom. At least, it was dry, and the smell of fuel oil not as bad as he expected. They shuffled forward, one foot at a time, their flashlights stabbing the blackness ahead, squeezing through the narrow slits cut in the plating between compartments. Once through the inside wall, there was another gap. The pale fingers of their torches groped into a vast, dark cavern, picking out the tangle of twisted ladders festooned from above: far below, a jumble of

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round shapes seemed to be talking as the water slapped and sighed round them.

"The engine-room," Heskin whispered. "All the turbines and machinery must have fallen out when she turned over."

In spite of himself, he was interested; he pushed on without noticing the change in the air, that over the smell of oil something else was hanging—sour and musty. Then they came to a dead stop. The wall of plating before the next compartment was smooth and blank, with only a square hole cut in the floor before it. Their lights showed a straight fall, without any foothold, to the next deck.

"That's that," said Heskin. For the first time he was aware of the other thing that was seeping up towards them.

But Marianne was uncoiling the rope from her waist. "They told me about this. We can lash the rope here and let ourselves down." She pulled the ball of twine from her pocket. "They said, too, that the way twists and turns below. Tie the end to something when we get down and pay it out as we go. Then we are certain to find our way back."

He looked down doubtfully. "Did they—get them—get everything out after it happened?"

She turned from tying the rope. "Yes. We shan't come across any bodies—if that's what you mean."

When they had slid down, they were walking on the ceiling of a passage with steel doors on one side, some open, some jammed shut: the pattern of those they managed to look into was all the same—a tangle of bedding, uniform, and furniture heaped where it had fallen downwards. They edged on past a smooth half-circle of plating like a tank or gasometer—the outside of the ammunition hoist of one of the big turrets, he thought—and then there was another blank wall, another hole in the floor. Now the smell was almost overpowering.

Heskin shone his torch down the rungs of a reversed ladder that slanted away into the black, trembling surface of oily water.

"Well, this is it. We don't want to get wet and we haven't any more rope."

Marianne was peering over his shoulder. "We could climb down the back of that ladder. The water can't be very deep."

"I think it's stupid."

"Well, I'm going to have a try." She pushed past him.

He was not quite sure how it happened: one moment she was hanging from the rungs of the ladder with her torch alight, then there was a scrape of metal, a smothered cry, followed by a splash, and the light went out.

Escape never occurred to him then. As his torch searched round and steadied on her, there was only a feeling of relief. She had been right under, her hair streaked and hanging, and her face smudged with oil. But the water was only knee-deep, as she leaned against the side wall.

"I told you not to." She made a movement back towards the ladder; above the slosh of the water he heard the sharp hiss of her

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breath as something black and bloated, that glistened in the torch-light, rolled away from her on the face of the oil.

" It's all right. It's only an old life-jacket." It was difficult to make it sound convincing. " Come over here and I'll haul you up."

She tried another step and then her voice came back, for the first time small and forlorn, " I can't. I've twisted my ankle."

He never knew quite how he managed to reach her. Then, the haul up the ladder and back the way they had come, holding her in front of him, trying to take the weight off the injured foot, while she shone his torch and followed the guiding-string. He had just said, " I think the best thing will be to shin up myself and then raise you in a sling," when they came to the blank wall with the hole in the roof above. By the light of the torch, Heskin could see the string slanting up to the point where they had tied it to a ring-bolt.

But there was no rope hanging down as they had left it.

★ ***The Third Part of "Hornets' Nest," by Christopher Landon appears in next month's Argosy, on sale March 10.***

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 19

We are pleased to announce the five winners of Argosy's nineteenth Prize Crossword Competition:—

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These readers who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Doctorate.* 5, *Pitch.* 8, *Ideal.* 10, *Limelight.* 11, *Treasurer.* 12, *Rathe.* 13, *Replied.* 15, *Ermines.* 16, *The helm.* 18, *Slander.* 20, *Areca.* 21, *Southerly.* 23, *Modelling.* 24, *Ravel.* 25, *Lords.* 26, *Fretfully.*

Down. 1, *Drifter.* 2, *Crepe.* 3, *Allured.* 4, *Elm-tree.* 5, *Pilgrim Father.* 6, *Tightened.* 7, *Hotbeds.* 9, *Les Miserables.* 14, *Pretender.* 16, *Trammel.* 17, *Mastiff.* 18, *Smuggle.* 19, *Royalty.* 22, *Rival.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 22

Prize Crossword No. 22 will be found on page 144. For rules of entry, please see page 77.

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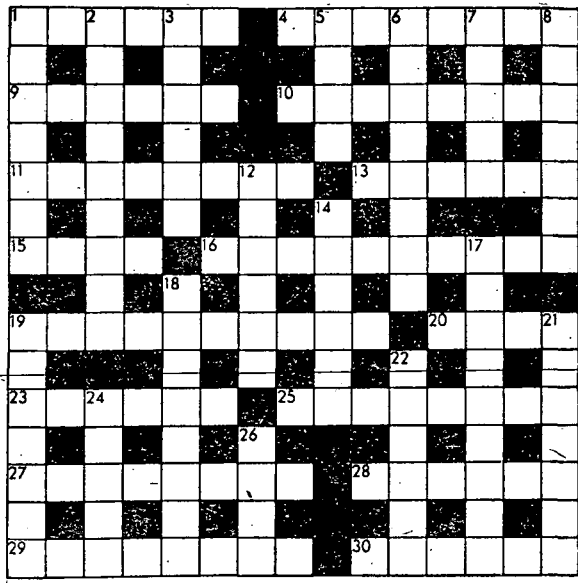
PRIZE CROSS WORD

No. 22

★

Rules of Entry on Page 77

★



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CUT ALONG THE LINE

CLUES

Across

1 A tidy tree (6).

4 Divert a fish—it's on the road (8).

9 "Gentlemen ——s out on the spree" (Kipling) (6).

10 This nervy person ends in a fog (8).

11 Another form of reaction (8).

13 It's a sticker, but I could make it solider (6).

15 In French all is prepared to expel (4).

16 He who plays Touchstone must (3, 3, 4).

19 Could Lothario be thus nautically described ? (10).

20 A fault in speech, but any lips may make it (4).

23 Gee, a dean can say what's to be done (6).

25 A bitter trial, no doubt (4, 4).

27 A stout rip can still get the better of competition (8).

28 Diners eat it, horses race on it, water runs in it (6).

29 A summer saint and—what ? A disciplinarian ? (8).

30 The Navy is scattered through the west (6).

Down

1 A knight and two commanding officers raise the wind (7).

2 They make a successful bid for second place on 28 across (7-2).

3 A hundred musical stops are heraldic (6).

5 "Oh gracious, why wasn't I born old and ——?" (Dickens) (4).

6 Ran back to an oarsman —there's less room (8).

7 I dial for an epic poem (5).

8 It can certainly occur in the seventh rally (7).

12 Cut cold for the supernatural (6).

14 Morality in the northern region is racial (6).

17 Minerva's plant, and what she may have said when creating it (5, 4).

18 It sounds as if these lawless types forbid a song (8).

19 Moor ate here, appropriately (3-4).

21 Caress the bird ; it's a model (7).

22 Can a Leftist not be thus skilful ? (6).

24 "Too late ! Ye cannot —— now" (Tennyson) (5).

26 An admirable punishment, evidently (4).

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